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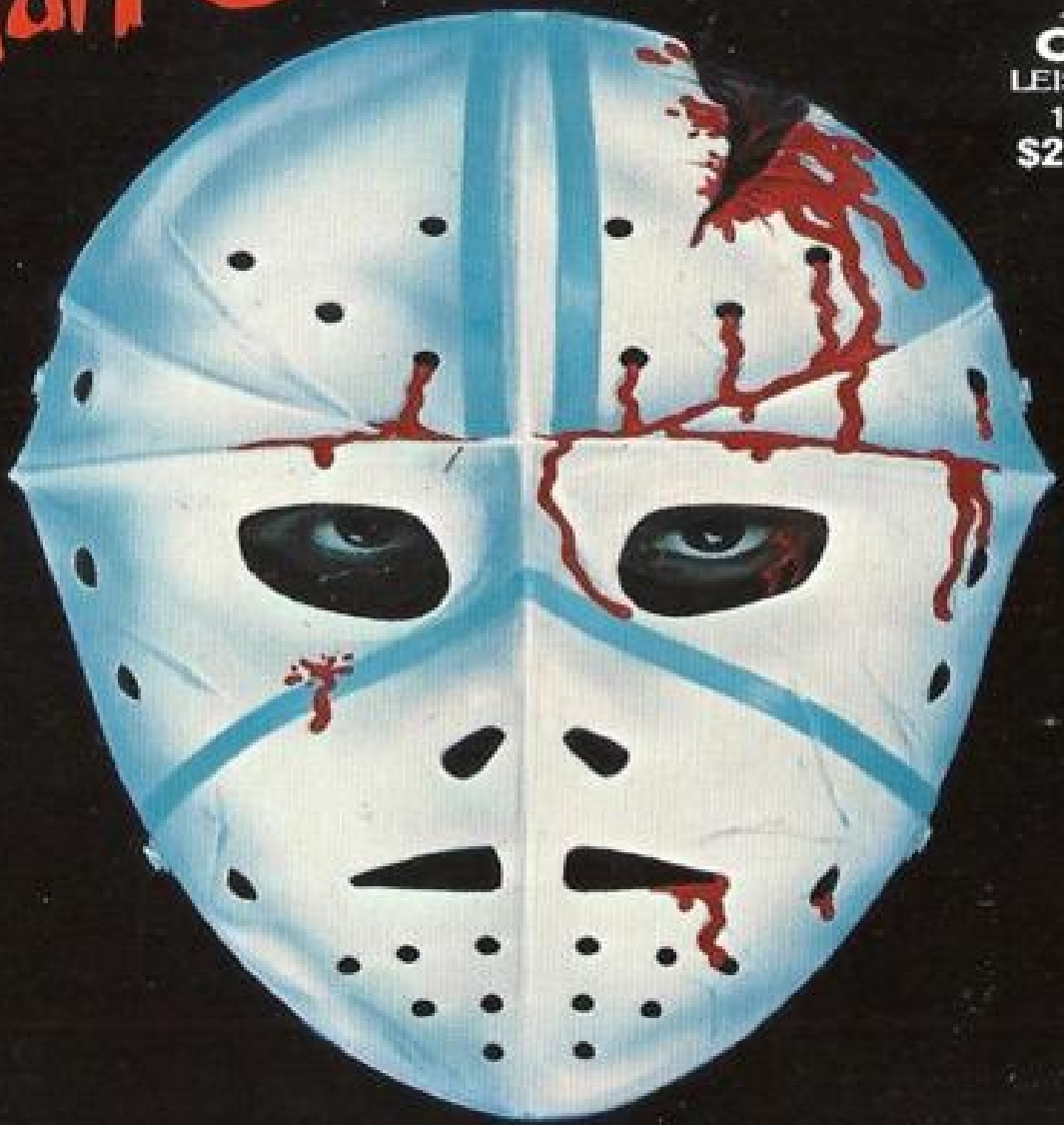

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"There is a sign
that is always posted on houses
that harbour hatred and horror:
TOURISTS ACCOMODATED"
—Philip St. George
The Satan Sleuth

DEATH COMES AT THE BEGINNING

There was something ominous about the radio newscaster's voice that morning. The familiar crackling tenor had taken on a tone of utter solemnity. No one within earshot or listening range of Ed Harris's habitually breezy voice had ever heard him so muted and so impressed with the import of his own words.

"*... And I'm Ed Harris with the KLTZ Early Morning Report. Crystal Lake in Pinehurst County, the scene of several unsolved deaths years ago, is tragically back in the top of the news this morning, Police have uncovered the remains of eight as yet unidentified persons in a gruesome and baffling story of mass murder...*"

If you were familiar with Harris's vocal style you could catch the beat he took before he went on:

"*.. Judging from the sheer brutality of the murders, police theorize that they must have been committed by at least four persons...*"

There was but one more pregnant pause, a heartbeat's worth of time.

"*The sole survivor of the massacre has been taken under heavy sedation to County Hospital in Linfield for observation. She's been unable to provide police with any clues and is being kept under round-the-clock guard...*

Ed Harris had never made such a dire broadcast in all his years as a career newscaster, and had probably thought he never would. Not many radio announcers ever had, when you got right down to it. Jack the Ripper had closed down his shop almost a hundred years ago. But now, in this day and age, anything was possible. This was nineteen eighty-two. Corpses Aweigh!

No matter how awesome, how horrible.

The Crystal Lake Killer was far from done. Miles from *Finis*.

Or was it Killers...?

No one knew for sure, or could have said with any certainty.

Certainly not Ed Harris of Station KLTZ.

***

Toward evening of that fatal day, the dying sun shot its final rays over a setting that could have been lifted from a Norman Rockwell painting. A time-worn country marketplace flanked by a long line of bushes just turning their leaves to the colors of autumn stood remote and isolated in the Pinehurst County wilderness. A wide gravel parking area fronted the place, leading out to the state highway which ran past its bucolic facade *Harold and Edna's* was a kind of Ma and Pa Kettle structure, almost a vision of times gone by. The high bushes and engulfing grass were overgrown, untended, strengthening the aspect of dismal neglect. The building had a battered second story, the living quarters of those who presided over this ancient country kingdom. The wooden frame was unpainted, scabbing with age. Shutters on the windows showed missing slats. The rotting rooftop indicated an immediate need for repair. The waning sunlight etched all these failings in streaks of golden illumination.

A heavy truck roared by on the highway, its motor's thunder shattering the stillness. The silence that followed was heavy and thick, only to be broken again by the sound of a radio playing somewhere. A news broadcast, incredibly out of time and place in this rural graveyard of a place. "*Judging from the sheer brutality of the murders, the police theorize...*"

It was nothing more than a repeat of Ed Harris's awesome morning report on the Crystal Lake murders, a re-run of the horrors.

Beyond the crumbling house and the store front, a sagging clothesline swayed in the evening dusk in a very narrow back yard, running its length to a rickety wooden shed. The clothesline was supported by a solitary pole. Linen and sundry garments hung on the line billowing in a strong breeze, among them a pair of flapping khaki pants and an olive green shirt hanging side by side. The radio voice talked on, louder now, as if the volume had been turned up:

"*...The sole survivor of the massacre has been taken under heavy sedation to County Hospital in Linfield for observation. She's been unable to provide police with any clues....*"

Suddenly, the shrouds of wet laundry parted, and a man emerged, making his slow way back toward the house. The transistor radio jutting from one pocket of his threadbare shirt pinpointed the radio voice:

"*... kept under round-the-clock guard....*"

The man grunted without inflection, and worked a thumb along his nose almost abstractedly. He was paunchy, unshaven, lost somewhere in his forties, a man whom time had passed by without even his noticing. Clumsily, he collided with the solitary clothesline pole on his return to the house, a pole he should have known was there for he had passed it a thousand times. The transistor continued to blare its dreadful news, filling the back yard with Modern Times and all its awesome potentialities.

An upstairs window overlooking the back yard abruptly grated upward, and a worn-faced, dried-out woman thrust her angry countenance into view. Her sullen mouth, unlipsticked and sour, spewed down venom—

"Goddammit, Harold! I spent all day yesterday washing your clothes and look what you're doing to 'em. Shows how much you care about me!"

Harold, slumped awkwardly on the earth, surrounded by the clean laundry he had brought down in his collision with the pole, stared yearningly upward, but only for a second. The dream that Edna and he had shared had been killed by her a long, long time ago. He staggered erect, pulling the garments with him. The volume of the little transistor picked up as he did so. Ed Harris's voice cannonaded, drowning out Edna's harangue and the possibility of a tirade.

"Easy, woman," Harold muttered, under his breath. "No problem."

Edna, face working, recognizing defeat again, disappeared from view, as she slammed the window shut vehemently.

"*...Police today are working on a variety of leads....*"

Harold, sighing, clicked the transistor radio off.

The silence closed in again.

The sun continued its downward plunge beyond the far horizon.

***

In the upstairs living room, Edna stomped away from the window in a cold fury. The years had only strengthened, not diminished, her war with her husband. Lips compressed, she turned her attention to the partially functional old clunker of a black-and-white TV set which Harold had provides for her use. It was better than nothing in this God forsaken wilderness. She flipped the set on and plopped herself down in disgust on the lumpy, faded couch that faced the thing, scooping up her knitting needles. Flicking the pair of them expertly, she resumed her work on a sweater. She ignored her surroundings of mustiness and clutter. The living room was more like an old attic and she had given up on that too long ago, just as she had on Harold But suddenly, there was something new in her life.

An earnest-faced TV reporter was staring back at her, saying the darnedest things. Edna forgot her knitting for a long moment.

"*... A police spokesman tells Eyewitness News that authorities have been combing the area since just before dawn. Reports of cannibalism and mutilation are still unconfirmed. Nevertheless, these murders are already being called the most brutal in local history. The mutilations, because of their sexual characteristics, according to medical experts, indicate a psychotic personality....*"

Edna, intent now, leaned forward to adjust the long rabbit-ear antennae, spreading the rods apart to get a better picture.

But the audio was perfect, and all too clear and plain.

"*...The motive behind the grisly murders remains a mystery at this hour as does the identity of the killer or killers. The search continues for more bodies....*"

"My God," Edna murmured to herself, "My God, my God!"

"*... Residents of the Lake region are being urged to take extra precautions when approaching strangers and to report anything unusual to police immediately. We'll be back with the weather forecast after this important message...*"

Upset now, Edna rose from the couch, the sweater forgotten, and tried not to run to the door leading to the downstairs market.

She was a woman who had been pretty once and finely-figured, but dead dreams and a bad marriage had overwhelmed all that. She had

not had too much education but she did have imagination, that refuge of the whole of man and womankind, and she knew what the words *cannibalism* and *mutilation* meant. *Sexual mutilation... my God!*

She pulled back the door and shouted down the stairwell, "Harold, what're you doing down there?"

There was no answer, no response of any kind. Not a sound.

She rushed to the window, jerking it upward once more.

"Harold, I want to talk to you!"

The back yard was empty, the laundry quietly swayed in the evening wind. It was getting darker now, all too fast. Edna clutched at her bosom, straining to see down into the yard, past the clothesline.

For an instant, she thought she saw a human form visible between the layers of drying clothes. From her vantage point, it was difficult to make out quite clearly who it was. Yet who else could be in her own back yard but her husband? Nobody else belonged there.

"Harold?" Edna called out, fearfully.

Again there was no reply. The indistinct outline vanished from her gaze. A trick of the evening shadows, the half-light. Now the TV blasting behind her unnerved her once more. She went back to the set and turned it off. Then she returned to the window, peering out unhappily.

"Harold! Damn you—where are you?"

There was no sign of anyone or anything.

Edna was too upset and nervous to notice that there was now a gap in the over-filled clothesline where several articles of clothing had hung only seconds ago with all the rest of the wet laundry.

The khaki pants and olive green workshirt were gone.

Edna stomped out of the room, determined to find the missing Harold before her nerves and her imagination got the best of her altogether. Damn Living out in the country!

She literally flew down the rickety, uncarpeted steps to the store proper below. Her heart was pounding too fast and her head was filled with all sorts of wild ideas and notions. "*Harold! Harold!*"

The market was dark, save for random shafts of dying sunlight streaming through the grimy front windows. Edna scanned the gloomy aisles frantically. Still no sign of Harold. Her heart thumped fearfully in her bosom. My God, where was the man?

She saw stacks of merchandise, canned goods and bins filled with produce, but no Harold. Edna stepped timorously through the aisles. "Harold...?" she called softly. There was almost affection in her voice now, not anger. She longed for the sight of him.

A huge rabbit, grey and awesome for once, appeared as if by magic from behind a piled arrangement of Campbell's tomato soup cans, standing on its hind legs, whiskers bristling, eyes trying to guess Edna's next move. His sudden materialization made Edna jump. Her eyes popped in alarm.

But then she rallied and seized a tomato from the produce display on her right and hurled it angrily at the animal.

"God damn pest—what are you staring at?" She had missed her target and the rabbit had not even dodged. His eyes shone weirdly in the gloom. His whiskers made him look *evil*.

In a frenzy, Edna pawed at the produce display, finding more vegetables, and flung them wildly at her silent tormentor, This time, the rabbit dodged them all, and scurried away with a burst of speed, disappearing down the long aisle. Edna, almost out of breath, tried to control herself. It wasn't easy. Things were happening too fast.

The sunlight was almost gone.

Gloom closed over the interior of the market, the dark shadows stretching and lengthening. Edna, clad only in a faded nightgown, pushed toward the screen door that led into the back yard. If she didn't discover where Harold was real soon—she tried not to think about that. The damn fool had be somewhere, didn't he?

She clawed her way through the sagging clothes line, touching a pair of pajamas, finding them still wet. They were clammy to her touch. She reached the uncommon gap in the line, she paused for a second. Clothes were missing. Which ones? But the shock was easily explained. Harold had taken them, of course. The pants and the workshirt.

"Christ Almighty, Harold," she blurted aloud, to firm up her faltering courage. "You just take what's yours and leave the rest to me, is that it? I gotta bring all the rest of the clothes upstairs, huh? Very considerate!" Sighing, she reached down for the wicker laundry basket close by on the hard earth, and began to take the clothes from the line. "You could at least have finished the job. Do I have to do everything around here, Harold?"

She heard a noise behind her. Frozen with fear, she whirled in terror, her hands going up to her breasts.

A sheet on the line, filling out awesomely, strangely, taking on the size and shape of a human form, billowed before her. She gulped. Her heart hammered violently, painfully.

"Harold...?" she murmured, swallowing hard. "I swear—you're such a child...."

Half-defiantly, half-hoping against all hope, she plucked at the sheet and ripped it off the line. It drooped like a flag to the earth. There was no one behind it. No Harold, nobody.

Edna almost passed out, overcome with her fears which had produced nothing but more mental torment and more questions. Where was Harold? She stared up at the dark evening sky and pulled herself together. This was silly, altogether too ridiculous. That damn TV news show! Grimly, breathing deeply, she began to gather the remaining laundry off the line. Tossing the garments into the basket, she ignored the sinister rustlings and rattlings of the tree branches behind her.

When she was done, she hauled the basket up, anchored it on her hip and strode back to the house. She had to pass the ancient wooden shed on her route. It squatted like a dark sentinel in the light.

The shed door creaked open with a snapping sound like a pistol shot.

A crashing noise followed, a muffled clatter of things falling, from within the walls of the wooden shed.

Edna, with a low scream, rushed back into the store, slamming the door behind her. In her mind, all kinds of terrors surged to the surface.

When it was safely shut, she put her back to it and closed her eyes. She thought her heart would burst, it was beating so fast.

The night seemed to have a thousand eyes, and they were all staring at her from the darkness engulfing her.

Deeper in the store proper, Harold was blissfully, serenely happy, and completely unaware of Edna's half hour of terror.

The large white-grey rabbit which had given Edna such a bad time had hopped across a row of canned goods, spanning the journey with a leap to a nearby shelf. Harold had found him there, taken him gently by the nape of his furry neck and deposited him upon his own shoulder. Harold and the rabbit were great friends, like master and dog.

Harold then unscrewed the lid of a vacuum-sealed jar of peanuts, popped a handful into his own mouth and fed the large rabbit the same. The animal munched contentedly on his shoulder. Harold returned the jar to the shelf after carefully rescrewing lid on again and flicked his pocket transistor radio back on. Music filtered through the silence of the store—a disco number. Harold hummed under his breath, tunelessly. Almost without thinking, he reached for a long-handled broom that was propped against the tier of shelves and began to sweep the floor of the market. The rabbit did not stir from his shoulder, busily finishing off his share of the peanuts. He did not lose his perch.

Harold swept by the dairy case, paused in his occupation, and picked up a half-gallon jug of milk. He broke the seal and pulled off the cap. First, he offered his rabbit a taste that was refused. Then he gulped down a long, heartfelt swig himself. Harold was a very simple man, which was one of the reasons his marriage was such a failure from the very beginning. He was not exactly a go-getter or an ambitious man.

The libation-refreshment done, Harold recapped the milk jug and returned it to the case, resuming his sweeping chore until he noticed the cellophane packages of carrots on display in the produce section moving slightly. He rummaged beneath the pile and produced another rabbit, a white one this time, all white. The animal was

diligently nibbling on a carrot. Harold smiled and parked the culprit on his free shoulder. Harold smiled fondly at both his rabbit friends.

"Sorry, guys. It's back to the slammer for you both before Edna makes a fur coat out of you. Okay?"

Still humming, the radio still playing, Harold trooped back to the rear door of the store. En route, he passed a rack of cakes and pies. He stopped long enough to open a box of six chocolate-covered doughnuts. He removed one, shoved it in his mouth, closed the package and put it back on the rack, making sure to hide it behind several unopened packages.

That was how Edna found him, with a rabbit on each shoulder and his cheeks filled with doughnuts. She was so glad to see him, so relieved, and so unable to explain her earlier fears, that she immediately launched into her usual, all-too-familiar role of nag, virago and unhappy housewife. Aggravated Edna.

"Didn't I feed you enough today?"

The rabbits shot from his shoulder at the sound of her furious voice, disappearing with a clatter behind the aisles of stacked goods. Edna planted herself before Harold, hands on hips, eyes shooting sparks.

Harold could not answer. He was caught and his mouth was full.

"Didn't the doctor say you had to lose weight? I try to help you but you sneak food behind my back. What am I gonna do with you? You're like a goddamn little kid!"

Harold blinked, face reddening.

Edna did not, could not let up.

"And put those filthy animals back where they belong. Please!"

Harold nodded dumbly, turning away from her, going to retrieve his furry friends from their hiding places. They too feared Edna, as he did. As he always had since the day his love for her had stopped.

Dutifully, Harold did as she had ordered him. She stalked upstairs disgustedly, her terrors all set aside, temporarily, at least. Anger and relief had washed away fear.

Outside, the night winds had begun to set up an eerie serenade, whistling and whispering through the branches and leaves of the

surrounding trees. It was always like that out here in the wilderness, especially after sunset when darkness closed in from all sides.

Edna had never liked that, not ever.

***

With the gray and white rabbits back on his shoulders, Harold, still chewing the remainder of his doughnut, ambled across the darkened back yard. He had obtained a flashlight from the store to accomplish what Edna had ordered him to do. The wind rustled creepily in the night. Harold paid it no mind. Unlike Edna, he had no imagination at all.

The interior of the wooden shed which contained the hutch for the offending rabbits was as dark as a tomb. Harold thumbed the flashlight on as he entered. The stabbing glare illumined old barrels, a wide variety of tools and sundry odds and ends collected down through the years. But the rabbits on Harold's shoulders squirmed uneasily and jumped off, scurrying away from him, squealing as they went, as if something was radically wrong about the shed this time. Harold frowned. "What're you little guys so nervous about? Edna set you off your feed?"

Chuckling, he fanned the flashlight's beam about the corners, trying to find his furry cronies. And then the flash stopped as Harold, his skin beginning to crawl, saw with his own eyes what had made White and Gray behave so funny. *Mother of God!*

Through the grillwork of the hutch, the chicken wire he had erected to keep them in, he saw the huddled, sprawled mass of furry forms, the contorted, bloodied, glassy-eyed bodies of many dead rabbits. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The glinting glassy stares, the splattered crimson staining the bed of grass, newspapers and old leaves, was a shock he had never experienced in his lifetime.

The limp carcasses of his pets. His beloved pets...

His face twisted, hardened into a mask of outrage.

The blood left his face. The carnage was so complete. So awful.

"Who could do this...?" Harold demanded thickly of the darkness. There was no answer, of course. There could not be.

Trembling, he reached down for the lid of the hutch and lifted it.

A big timber rattlesnake, three times as deadly and menacing because of its nearness, shot upward from the hutch, mouth distended and gleaming. The twin poisonous fangs, arcing in the glare of the flashlight, riveted Harold where he stood. But his reflexes and pure instinct saved him.

The rattler's hiss, uncoiling body and deadly fangs vanished as Harold slammed the lid of the hutch down violently, losing his flashlight in the process. The shed was plunged into total blackness, and Harold lost his wits completely.

Literally scared to death, he bolted from the shed, forgetting all about White and Gray. His brain was a riot of terror and confusion. As he raced to safety, his hands ground into the pit of his own stomach, to keep from regurgitating. His blood was churning and the taste of bile in his mouth was like the kiss of death, cold and sickening.

Behind him, the loathesome rattler hissed and spat with fury, and the rabbits still left alive whimpered in an agony of terror and despair.

The big timber rattlesnake thrashed against its prison walls, the long, muscular body snapping like a bullship.

The dead rabbits paid no heed.

***

Harold burst through the door of the upstairs living quarters like a man gone mad. His eyeballs were two pools of horror. Edna, unsuspecting, was in his way when he thundered in. He bowled her over, knocking her to one side like a whirlwind. She tried to catch him, to hold onto him, not comprehending. Her own earlier terrors did not need this demented behavior on her husband's part. Not now, not tonight!

"What happened, Harold? What's the matter?"

He could not speak. His face was ashen, and still his hands were framed into his stomach. He shook his head at her and headed on into the bathroom. Edna stared after him in wonder.

"It's all that crap you've been eating," she declaimed in righteous anger. "Stuffing yourself like you were a pig!"

She turned to the TV set again, turning up the volume to drown out the disgusting noises he was making in the bathroom. Flopping down on the lumpy couch, she reached for her knitting needles One of them was missing.

"Now where could that other needle have gone?" she mused.

Edna couldn't find it, no matter how much she rummaged. And it was going to cost her.

In the bathroom, a combination storage place and john, there were two ample cupboards facing each other, each leaning against a wall. A mess of boxes and crates lying on top of each other stood behind a dusty curtain. The toilet bowl, a remainder from the days when this was just an over-sized bathroom, held the center of attention. The box was against the fourth wall, at an angle behind the door. Harold, trousers down, stomach churning, made good use of it. The first bout of diarrhea had hit him hard. The sight of the gruesomely butchered rabbits and that king-sized snake hadn't helped, either.

He loosened his collar, sweat gleaming from his pudgy face. He pawed behind the toilet tank and produced his hidden bottle of whiskey, something Edna would never approve of, not in a million years.

Unscrewing the cap quietly, he took a hearty swig.

He leaned back and shut his eyes, trying to sort out his thoughts and his feelings. What the hell was going on here?

"Those poor little creatures... *damn!*"

Another swig made him feel a little better, but not much. Some of the liquor spilled, trickling down his unshaven chin. He wiped at it with one sleeved arm. His eyes roved aimlessly over the interior of the storeroom-bathroom.

The dusty curtain, masking the boxes and crates, seemed to ripple subtly, as if moved by an ever so slight draft of air, as if someone standing behind that curtain had let out a breath. Harold blinked. He shook his head again. Then came a small, hollow brittle noise. From behind the curtain? Harold felt a chill.

He tried to locate the noise but couldn't figure its source. It was over almost as soon as it had begun. Forgetting his position on the bowl, he shuffled over to one of the closets and yanked the door open. He saw nothing but empty shelves and layers and layers of dust.

Breathing in relief, Harold hitched up his pants again, just enough to enable him to hobble grotesquely toward the dusty curtain. It still fluttered all too suspiciously, random draft or not.

Harold ripped it apart, seeing the odd assortment of boxes and crates—empty, lifeless and somehow uncannily menacing because of that very lifelessness. Harold shuddered, forgetting his uneasy stomach.

He checked the other closet, too, with a glance first, and then he almost changed his mind. Reassured, he stumbled to it, his pants lowering past his hips. This closet had the look of one that had not been opened or entered in a long, long time.

Harold tugged at the old door. It creaked and pulled back, opening.

The huge, oncoming hand holding a mammoth meat cleaver came at him from out of the darkness of the closet like an express train.

Harold managed a half-scream, a bleat of horror and astonishment, as the cleaver came down, imbedding itself in his chest like the hammer of God. Or the Devil. Or maybe both.

His scream mingled incongruously with the laughter issuing from the TV set that Edna was watching in the living room behind him.

The hand twisted the cleaver in a vicious, merciless circle. Harold's chest exploded in flame and agony. And death.

His paunchy body toppled backwards, crashing to the floor.

The meat cleaver jutted from his chest like a tombstone.

***

Edna heard the crash from the other room where she sat. She turned off the television set with a frown and a habitual sigh. Clumsy Harold again. The man was all thumbs all the time!

"Harold?"

When no answer came, she left her seat on the couch and went to the bathroom door. It would not budge when she pushed against it. At her feet, she saw fluid seeping out from underneath the door. She stooped, dipped her finger in the stuff, and sniffed. The toilet was now flushing inside and it didn't stop the way it should have, as if someone had left their hand on the lever. "Harold, what's taking you so long in there? You all right?"

Her nose had already provided her with some kind of answer even if Harold hadn't. He had been hitting the bottle again!

"Whiskey. I thought so," she grimly told herself.

She walked back to the desk in the living room, found the skeleton key she had placed there for emergencies such as this and hurried back to the door. But before she could insert it, to her shock she now found the bathroom door opened a crack. A tiny crack, but it was open. For a moment, she was nonplussed.

"Harold...?"

Gingerly, she edged the door inward. It swung wide, revealing the boxes, the crates, the dusty curtain.

The flushing noise was continuing unabated, a roaring Niagara.

Almost reflexively, she stooped to pick up the half-empty whiskey bottle. Then she turned toward the maddening sound of the toilet, to confront Harold with the damaging evidence of the bottle.

She screamed at the sight of Harold sitting on the toilet just behind the angled door, a Harold she had never seen before.

Harold, with his pants down, like a grotesque dummy of some kind, something red drooling out of the corners of his mouth, two twin streams of crimson The meat cleaver thrust outward from his chest. One of Harold's elbows was jammed against the flushing handle of the toilet tank.

Harold's dead, sightless eyes were like two bits of broken glass.

The whiskey bottle fell from Edna's senseless fingers. It hit the floor and shattered, scattering shining shards.

Edna began to scream uncontrollably. From somewhere behind her, the huge hand rematerialized. It did not hold a meat cleaver this time. It held the long, missing, knitting needle.

The hand drove the needle directly into the back of Edna's skull with such force and strength that the striking end pushed out through her screaming mouth, all in one lightning-like movement.

Edna was gagging on her own blood as she died on the floor without ever knowing why.

Death walked in Pinehurst County again, for the ninth and tenth time in a matter of days.

Two days, to be exact.

THE MAD STRANGER

In the morning light of the new day, a red passenger van screeched loudly as it rounded a corner heading into the working class neighbourhood. Weather-worn two-family and three family houses lined both sides of the block. In the street, a noisy group of children playing a game of stickball were oblivious of the oncoming vehicle. Their voices rose in loud excitement and argument, indicating a variety of ethnic persuasions. The driver of the van sounded his horn, and the children scattered only as the sound came closer. Some of them yelled as the vehicle swept on by. A few others banged on the van's sides in defiance and contempt. Pinehurst County had its ghettos too, just like any other city in America.

The van continued on its course, slowed down, and then halted a block from the turbulent ball game. The driver parked in the first available space. She emerged from her seat and went on to the passenger side.

Two passengers got out with wide grins and exuberance. Debbie was brown-haired, vivacious and exuded good health. She was the sort of teenager who could easily double as an All-American cheer-leader. She was verging on twenty years of age but she looked younger, Andy was tall, slim and ruggedly handsome. Together they made an attractive couple.

The driver of the red van was Chris. Debbie's age, she too looked like a suitable candidate for 4H honors. The only difference was that her blond good looks could not quite conceal a habitual air of tension, like a wild animal about to spring, or young one with problems.

Debbie squinted in the sunlight at the long row of family houses. "Which one is it, Chris?"

"It's the last house on the left." Chris pointed. "She lives downstairs." She turned back to the van as Debbie and Andy linked hands. "Hey, Shelly! Come on out and meet your date." She directed her summons through the window of the van, but no one emerged. Instead, a voice called out sarcastically, "Bring her to me!"

Chris frowned and looked at Debbie and Andy for help. Andy shrugged. "What're you gonna do?"

Debbie made a face. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Chris sighed and shouted into the van once again. "How about you two? You coming?"

Now two voices roared back in unison, "NO!"

Chris threw up her hands in a gesture of frustration. Her intense look was magnified. "Come on," she murmured to Debbie and Andy, "we'll do it without them." They started down the street toward the designated house. None of them saw or noticed the rotund, ominous-looking figure which now materialized from the other side of the red van. A hideous, ghostly mask shrouded the figure's face. The unsuspecting threesome continued along the street. The awesome figure followed, keeping well back at a safe distance to avoid detection. Chris was eyeing the house fronts intently. Andy and Debbie had locked arms about each other and were kissing openly in broad daylight, oblivious to everyone and everything else. Chris, turning, caught them. She shook her head.

"Sex, sex, sex," she said, drily. "You guys are getting boring, you know that?"

Debbie broke from Andy's embrace and kiss, mildly embarrassed.

Andy laughed. "So what would a weekend in the country be without sex?"

Debbie stiffened. "Cool it, Andy."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," Andy apologized hastily.

Amazingly, it was Chris who responded to that. "I know you didn't."

Slowly little by little, the masked rotund figure behind them had drawn closer. Chris, intent on making peace between her friends, was explaining herself. "Look, guys, I want you to have a good time this weekend. What happened to me at the cottage happened a long time ago. I'm all right now. Really. Forget about me."

Debbie relaxed, smiling softly. "Okay, I'll just forget that we've been friends for fifteen years. As a matter of fact, I'll act like I don't even know you." She spun on Andy. "Who is that girl? Do you know her?"

Now, before Andy could answer, the masked figure behind the trio attacked, rearing back and then leaping panther-like, a hand-held knife arcing down in the dazzling sunlight. The blade plunged into Andy's defenseless back. "*Ahhhh!*" Andy gasped, caught by surprise.

Debbie screamed and Chris recoiled.

The rubber knife had bent in half, toy that it was.

The masked assailant stood there, laughing like hyena.

Andy took a step toward him, hands clenched.

"Dammit, Shelly! Why do you always have to be such an asshole!"

The attacker did not remove his mask.

"I beg your pardon," came a lofty voice. "I am not an asshole. I am an actor."

"Same thing." Andy growled. "And you never will grow up."

Disgusted. Chris and Debbie turned away. They walked to the house they wanted. Andy dropped back in step with the erring Shelly. He placed an arm around the rotund figure at his side.

"Look, Shelly." His voice was paternal now. "You're my roommate and I like you... most of the time. But you gotta stop doing these things. Now, I set up this date for you, didn't I? So don't embarrass me. When you meet this woman, relax and be yourself."

"Would you be yourself," the lofty voice lowered, suddenly reaching up a pudgy hand and tearing the mask away, "if you looked like this?"

Andy shook his head as Shelly put on a pair of unflattering prescription glasses. The effect was ludicrous, as intended. Shelly was overweight, greasy-haired and utterly unkempt. Unmade beds would have looked better. Andy placed a hand on his shoulder, not unkindly.

"Just relax, huh? You'll be okay if you relax and don't push it."

Shelly gave him a fixed and idiotic grin, tossing his head to one side. Andy snorted helplessly.

Chris and Debbie had found the house. Porch steps led up to the front door of a shabby two-family house which looked like it hadn't seen a can of paint since the Beatles came to the United States. Chris rang the doorbell as Debbie smoothed the hug of her jeans around her hips. Shelly took a few steps back, matted down his unruly hair

with his two hands, then tucked in his loose shirt and also removed the silly glasses, as if readying himself for a good fight. Andy, looking on restrained a smile.

The front door swung open in a few moments.

A middle-aged Hispanic woman, her body shapeless in a mass of skirts, peered out at them through a screen door.

"Yes?" Her accent was definitely Spanish.

Chris smiled, excuding friendliness.

"Hi, Mrs. Sanchez. I'm Chris. We've come to pick up Vera."

The inquisitive face froze into a cold mask.

"She's not going," Mrs. Sanchez declared brusquely.

That was all she said. The door slammed quickly in Chris's face, just like that. Mrs. Sanchez had brooked no argument or explanations.

Stunned, the group exchanged glances, not knowing what to say or do next. To add to their confusion, from within the house came a loud, rising tirade of female voices, one younger, one older.

"What're they saying?" Chris demanded of anybody who could tell her. Debbie shook her head. "I don't know. I flunked Spanish."

With that, they all turned to leave, defeated, unable to solve the situation. Then the voices broke off and suddenly the front door was swinging open again, this time to reveal a raven-haired, exquisite young beauty whose tight jeans adorned a figure beyond compare, Vera Sanchez at twenty was a perfect *Ten*. There was a knapsack over her shoulder and a determined gleam in her snapping black eyes. But she forced a smile to make them all feel better about what was obviously a family *contretemps*. Yet all they could do was stare at her, still feeling funny about everything, still struck with her attractive appearance—and the knapsack.

"Hi, everybody. What're you looking at? Let's go."

Shelly, instantly intimidated by Vera's startling good looks, dropped behind the others, using Andy as a shield. He slipped his grotesque mask back on his face. Chris blinked at Vera.

"Is everything okay?"

"You know, just your basic old-fashioned mother problems." Quickly she changed the subject. "So where's my date?"

Shelly now came out from behind Andy's athletic facade.

"Hi," he murmured. There was sheep in his voice, not bull.

"You're Shelly?" Vera could not keep the disappointment out of her tone. Andy, angry, reached across the ripped the mask from Shelly's face. Shelly howled in protest. But before anything could come from this exposure, there was something else to occupy everyone's attention. Chris saw it first but it was Debbie who sounded the alarm.

"Hey! The van's on fire!"

Indeed it was. White smoke, rising and spreading, was coming out of the windows of the van. Soon the entire vehicle was engulfed, or at least seemed to be. The assorted luggage lashed the top of the red van was now lost from view. Chris out a yelp and bounded down the stoop. The others followed in varying degrees of intensity. In a body they raced to the smoking van, Andy was the first to reach it, the complete athlete, He jerked open the door on the passenger side.

Chris hurled herself at the driver's door, doing the same thing.

Thick, acrid smoke issued from the windows the van now. It was difficult to breathe, much less see. But the trouble was soon detected and it was just about what Andy and Chris had expected, given the two people they had left behind in the van. Chuck and Chili were not exactly the most dependable, reliable citizens in the universe. No way, man!

They could have been Cheech and Chong look alikes except for the fact that Chuck was a boy and Chili a girl. Together, however, they were just as wacky and far-out. Left alone, they could be counted on to gum things up or at the very least, cause some kind of trouble, as they had now.

They were sprawled in the back of the van, squatting on the floor, each puffing away like crazy on a bong filled with marijuana. Each had a stereo headset plugged into their ample ears which in turn was plugged into their very own Sony Walkman portable cassette players. Each was tuned out of the real world and tuned into their own private heavens, those Cloud Nines they always visited when they started to smoke grans. Dreamy-eyed, contented, they both turned grinning but indifferent faces as Chris and Andy put in an angry appearance.

All Chris and Andy could do was exchange glances, the kind that so clearly says, without words, *I should have known*.

As they well should have. Chuck and his Chili or Chili and her Chuck were as totally irresponsible as children in a candy store unguarded by personnel. Left alone, they were capable of anything—like setting themselves and the red van on fire.

"Come on," Chris ordered briskly. "Let's get this show on the road before any Smokeys get here and break up our party."

Nothing must break up or interfere with the glorious weekend she had planned for herself and the gang up at the Haven-Higgins Haven.

Nothing.

Not even the Crystal Lake Killer—or Killers.

Chili and her boyfriend Chuck continued to suck and puff away at the bong which was rather like a Turkish water pipe, only without the water, as Chris desperately put the red van in gear while the others did all they could to dispel and thin out the offending smoke.

The red van, trailing white smoke like a plume, barreled on out of the working class neighborhood, passing the stickball-players who set up a raucous hoot of derision as the vehicle swept on by. The seven young people were now ready for a great weekend.

And perhaps a great adventure.

***

The morning was still young as the red van, piloted expertly by Chris, sped along the empty rural highway. The New England countryside, a picture postcard of rolling low hills and verdant forests, was an almost changeless panorama, Chris had never tired of the view, in spite of all her problems. Mother Nature was like some lush harlot, advertising her wares for all to see. Chris grinned at the mental image this gave her. The driver's side window was open and the wind blowing in whipped her flaxen hair about her face. The only other seat in the van was the passenger seat. Andy held this one down, accommodating a willing Debbie on his strong lap. Hello, Young Lovers!

Andy yawned. "How much further to the cottage?"

"We could've been there already," Chris flung & mocking glance at Debbie, "if *some* people didn't have to go to the bathroom every five minutes!"

Debbie scowled and took the defensive. "Oh yeah? Well, just hope that you never get pregnant, 'cause all you do all the time is piss!"

Everybody laughed.

The red van reached the crest of a gentle hill. Debbie hit Andy's ear as Chris changed gears, readying for a long slide down the ribbon of highway which pointed toward a high wall of seemingly endless trees. The overhead sun was a yellow balloon in the blue sky.

At that moment, murder, slaughter and massacre were only words in the dictionary.

In the rear of the red van, Chili and Chuck lay sprawled on the floor involved in some very serious matters, like taking inventory of their supplies of Funny Stuff—joints and bags of marijuana, Shelly sat cross-legged closer to the back of the van. Directly opposite his pudgy form was Vera Sanchez. She also squatted but her long legs were wide open in an enticing V of femininity. Yet her gaze and attention were not on Shelly. The dark eyes were dreamily absorbed in the blue sky and the treetops racing by the prism of the back window. Shelly had been unable to take his eyes off her. Her body was far too sexy. There was too much pleasure in roving your eyes over girlie-goodies so close at hand.

Vera was all too aware of his scrutiny and the mental rape he was perpetrating. As she turned her head quickly at one point, she caught his hungry eyes fastened on her surging breasts. To cover up, Shelly averted his eyes and looked in Chuck's direction—he was lighting up another of his joints, inhaling it and then handing it to Chili, who took it as if it were manna from heaven. Which it certainly was for the likes of Chuck and Chili.

Shelly could not conceal his disgust. "Is that all you two are gonna do this weekend... smoke dope?"

Chuck's eyebrows raised in mild surprise at such a question. "Why not, man? Is there a law against it?"

"There are better things to do with your life."

"Like what?" The statement had confused Chuck.

Chili exhaled after a long intake on the joint. "I can't think of anything," she confessed cheerfully. Shrugging, she tried to pass the cigarette to Shelly. He declined with a wave of both hands. Chili then offered it to Vera Sanchez.

"Sure, why not?" Vera agreed and came forward on her hands and knees to receive the offering. As she managed that, she inadvertently thrust her shapely posterior almost full into Shelly's face. He made no attempt to retreat. Actually, he reveled in the closeness of such charms.

Vera puffed tentatively on the joint.

"Is this stuff any good?"

"Home grown, man!" Chuck chortled with pride. "Of course it's good. You think we mess with junk?"

Chili's drugged face smiled sleepily.

"And it's *good* for you, too. Strictly organic. No preservatives, man."

The aroma of good grass wafted toward the front of the vehicle. Andy's nostrils got the message. He shifted Debbie on his lap and craned his neck around. "Hey. Share the wealth with those less fortunate up front here." Vera nodded happily and passed the joint along.

Shelly was now rummaging through a small black suitcase of worn leather, a relic of a suitcase. Vera, her curiosity aroused, asked, "What d'ya got in there?"

Shelly looked very secretive before he answered. "My whole world," he said slyly.

"In that little thing?" She was incredulous and skeptical, too.

"Stick around," Shelly said mysteriously, and you'll see."

Vera Sanchez had no use for mysteries, especially from fat, ungroovy guys. She turned away and went back to her contemplation of the rear window. More blue sky and more high trees were rushing by.

Abruptly, there came the all too familiar whine and keen of sirens. There was no mistaking that sound. Police noises. Vera scrambled

erect and quickly spotted the pair of cruisers with lights flashing, now in pursuit of the red van. Smokey was hot on the trail.

"Oh, oh," Vera sang out. "Better hide the grass. It's the cops!"

Chris's sideview mirror had given her the bad news already.

"Oh, no," she murmured unhappily. Andy and Debbie tensed up.

Shelly looked out the back window glumly. "What're we gonna do?"

"Destroy the evidence," Vera exclaimed. "Pronto!"

Chuck's echo of those words was pure shock. "Destroy the evidence? No, man!"

Chili, the slightly more sensible of the two, stared him dead in the dazed eyes." Yes, man!"

Everyone exchanged worried glances. The siren sound was getting nearer and a lot louder. Vera was oddly amused by the situation and not at all alarmed. Her dark eyes twinkled. But without a word and with simultaneous precision, Chili and Chuck began to stuff loose grass and joints into their mouths. "Come on," Chuck urged, his jaws full. "Dig in!"

Andy, reaching around Debbie toward a bag of the stuff, seized it grudgingly. "Aw, shit!"

He began to chew as diligently, as Chuck and Chili were doing. Vera grinned and joined in. The police siren was blasting.

More bags were passed around to Chris and Debbie. Andy did the dispensing. "Here, eat," he commanded brown-haired Debbie. She shook her head at him. "No way. We're pregnant, remember?"

Chris demurred too. "Try me some other time I'm driving."

"Breakfast," Andy sighed, chomping vigorously. The sirens' wail was like an air raid now, Chili leaned toward Chris, frantically "You better step on it! Or we're heading for the last lock-up!"

Chris stepped on the pedal. The van picked up speed, but the police cruisers thundered on, narrowing the gap.

Chili, Chuck, Andy and Vera's cheeks were filled to capacity at that point. The dope was going down in huge amounts. Their faces were beginning to turn awesome shades of green. They couldn't eat fast enough. Only Shelly had not joined in the feast. He was hugging his

odd black suitcase, keeping his eyes peeled through the rear glass window.

"Faster!" he bellowed. "Faster!"

"Vera angrily thrust a fistful of grass at him. "Why don't you help us, big mouth?"

"Uh—" His reluctance was all too apparent. "I guess I'm just not hungry."

"You're *always* hungry!" Andy shouted around a mouthful of dope.

Shelly's face twitched at that, but to appease everyone, he began to nibble on the marijuana held out to him in Vera's hands.

Chris, blinking furiously, cried out. "They're too close. I gotta pull the van over. Hurry up and swallow! And everybody just be cool."

With that, she cut the van over, easing to the side of the highway, slowing down to a full stop. She thrust her head from the side window, to watch the cops arrive. But much to her astonishment and the surprise of everyone else, the twin police cruisers, flashers swirling like mad, barreled on by the van like released rockets. Dumbly, Chris saw them get smaller and smaller in the distance. And then the sight and the sounds were gone. Chris blinked again, in confusion and wonder.

Andy let out a huff of a belch. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said and put his hands to his stomach.

A huge collective sigh went up all over the van, more for regret of the destruction of so much good grass rather than the near-miss of a bust by the police. Vera, doubled over, groaned aloud. "The line forms at the rear, Handsome."

Chuck, dazed and glazed and utterly unhappy now, made his declaration to them all with full vocal inflection and dismay. "I'm gonna be sicker than all of you, man. Now I gotta spend the whole weekend totally *straight!*" He buried his face in his hands. "I don't think I can make it, man!"

Chili touched his shoulder gently. Her eyes held a curious smile.

"Chuck... look."

Slowly, she unbuttoned her blouse. Everyone was looking at her now. They saw her fingers reach down inside of her bra but instead of her full breasts emerging into view, out came a good-sized plastic

bag of marijuana, Chuck's lower jaw dropped foolishly. "Not now, man," he had begun to say, thinking she had sex on her mind, but then came the miracle of revelation. His big grin almost split his face in two.

"I'm a slow eater," Chili explained.

Chuck whooped in delight, throwing his arms around her in an excess of love, relief and praise.

"I love you, man!" he blurted, showering her with kisses on the mouth, cheeks, nose and eyes and neck. Everybody laughed again.

The near-miss with the cops and the grass had been just another adventure, another excitement, all part of living and being young people.

None of them could know what lay on the road ahead. How could they?

The twin police cruisers were just finding out for the first time. About what happened at *Harold and Edna's*.

To Harold and Edna, that is.

***

When the red van reached the scene of the slaughter, no more than another mile and a half down the highway, the setting was one of much activity, commotion and upheaval. Curious onlookers and rubberneckers had already gathered, forming that kind of crowd that is like no other. Chris sensed the difference as she drove up, slowing the van to get some idea of what was going on. It was all too obvious that something bad had happened here, something real bad. She could see the swath of road cutting in from the highway leading up to the ramshackle, run-down-looking marketplace. She noted the overgrown grass and weeds, the dismal appearance of but one more country place, isolated, forlorn, off the main drag. The two police cruisers, parked though they were, were still flashing those damn red lights. There was an ambulance, too, a long white vehicle. That somehow was more ominous than anything. Some body was hurt—or somebody was dead. Or both.

Everyone in the red van had quieted down.

The clincher was the medics, young, white coated guys coming out of the run-down store and marketplace, hauling two heavy body bags with them. Those canvas containers could only mean one thing. Andy let out a breath and Vera shuddered, clasping her arms about her own shoulders. Shelly's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Chili and Chuck were still more involved with smoking their joints. Chris could not take her eyes from the awful scene.

A morbid fascination seemed to have overcome her. Her natural anxieties about her own terrible past had surfaced again. They were being fueled again, as she remembered all too vividly....

Debbie, turning away from the scene as the medics disappeared into the ambulance and the back doors banged shut, caught the concern and the deep involvement on Chris's intense face.

"Hey, kiddo," Debbie mocked, not unkindly "Don't let your imagination run away with you—"

Chris caught herself, snapped out of her trance, and set the van in motion once more. Her eyes came back from whatever place she had been. She managed a shrug and a weak smile. "No skin off our noses, right?"

"Right on," Debbie said, smiling.

There was no more to comment about.

The red van resumed its race down the highway leaving trouble behind, leaving unanswered questions in the rear.

What the hell! This was not the world they had made. The adults and the grown-ups had screwed up that world, hadn't they? Everyone over thirty.

Debbie was right. Forget the past. Think only of the present, the here and now. Chris shook her old memories away and concentrated on the roadway again. It was still early but the sun was really heating up now. The countryside had never looked prettier. She floored the pedal, the wind whipping her hair again. It was great to be young, to be alive, no matter how you looked at it.

Harold and Edna could not have agreed with her more, as would have the dead, half-eaten rabbit lying on the ribbon of dirt road winding away to the left as Chris ploughed the red van onward toward Higgins Haven. The hilly highway was now leveling off,

flattening into a straighter, truer run. Chris kept her eyes peeled. The turnoff for the dirt road leading to the cottage was coming up real soon now. She couldn't wait for the long weekend to start. There was so much to think about, so much to do, so much to decide before she came back.

The wooded landscape loomed closer. The dirt road wound away to the west. Chris maneuvered the red van for the almost corkscrew turn. The sun blazed at her through the windshield. The trees were dappled with glinting slices of golden sunlight. Chris found the winding trail. Everybody in the van shouted with pleasure and expectancy.

Higgins Haven, here we come!

A few minutes later, with the red van lumbering along the winding dirt trail, bordered with encroaching trees, Debbie suddenly let out an anxious yell. "*Stop the van!*"

"What?" Chris blurted, "what is it?"

"STOP!" was all Debbie had time to say or explain.

Chris slammed on the brakes reflexively. The van lurched to a halt. Everyone bounced around in the interior. Chili and Chuck let out yelps of protest But Chris had responded not a moment too soon, obviously.

Everyone could see the body of a man lying directly in the road, only inches from the nose of the van. They all scrambled out for a closer look at the figure that lay like an old bundle of dirty laundry flung down in their path. Chris stared down at him numbly. The others all ringed around in an anxious circle. Everything was happening on this trip, or so it seemed.

The incredible figure lying on the ground was a withered old man with long stringy hair and white whiskers like a Santa Claus, an ancient, bony bundle of flesh outfitted in baggy, shapeless clothes of some kind. A duffle bag incongruously stood at his side. The oldtimer had to be well over seventy. None of them had ever seen anyone so old.

The old coot's eyes were closed. Either he was sleeping—or he was dead. Chris shook herself. "I must have been daydreaming. I didn't even see him!

Chuck, crouching for a closer look, chuckled. "Hey, you know he looks just like my grandfather, man."

Debbie shuddered. "Is he dead?"

Andy negated that. "Nah—just some old bum catching forty winks."

Vera smiled. "Maybe he's Rip Van Winkle?" Before anyone could think of doing something positive, the apparition lying on the ground opened its eyes, eyes of a marvelous hue and depth. Everyone took a step back. The eyes focused on Debbie's lovely face. "I must be in Heaven," the old man said in a remarkably vibrant and clear voice as everyone stooped to help him up.

Shelly recoiled at that. "Don't touch him! You don't know where he's been!"

Now, the old man tottered erect under his own power, though his legs seemed wobbly and uncertain. The luminous eyes swept over all the young faces encircling him. His smile through the full beard was warm. There was an aura about him, too. Strange lights danced in those damnable eyes of his.

"You are, all of you," he intoned with grand eloquence, "very kind and generous young people to lend a helping hand to a tired old man. Thank you very much." He began to dust himself off as if his rags were the finest of garments. "Perhaps I can repay your kindness."

His civilized manner of speaking coupled with his shabby appearance made them all exchange glances and expressions of curious wonder.

"My name is Abel, young people. And I am my brother's keeper."

He reached down into the duffle bag and rummaged. They could only look on and wait for his next words. "I have something very important to show all of you." Chris tensed, inexplicably, Debbie caught the action and took her hand, squeezing it for comfort and assurance. But all the group was watchful and guarded. You never could tell with dippy old men you met in the woods.

Abel produced a tiny bundle from the bag, something small, wrapped up in a scrap of some kind of cloth.

"Look what his Grace has brought me," Abel proclaimed.

He unwrapped the object, holding it in the palm of his old hand, right in front of Shelly's face. For a moment, Shelly could not recognize the small slimy, white oblong thing.

"What is that?" Shelly winced.

Abel smiled with all the beatific splendor of a holy man who has seen the Light, or Diogenes finding an honest man.

"I found this today. There were other pieces of the body lying there, but I believe that He wanted me to find this."

The blood drained from Shelly's face as his brain told him what his eyes were actually seeing in the old man's withered hand. He drew back, his pudgy face showing fright.

"That's an *eyeballl*" he shouted. "Oh, God!"

Abel's smile only grew wider. He looked at the rest of the group.

"He wanted me to warn you. Look at this—all of you!"

The command was accompanied by an extension of the long bony arm and the hand holding the eye hall for all to see. For an eyeball it was.

They shrunk from him in a body, all of them. Chris, Debbie, Vera, Andy, Chili and Chuck cringed at the awful sight. Chris could feel her heart trying to climb out of her chest. Her eyes blinked uncontrollably. Old visions and horrors from the past danced in her mind.

"See," Abel intoned solemnly, advancing on all of them, "with your own eyes what I have seen. Run away! Go back to where you came from! Now, my children!"

Fire and brimstone raged in his eyes. His voice had taken on volumes of doom and death. That was all any of them needed. With a rush and an almost unified bleat of terror, they whirled and raced back to the red van, Chris was in the lead, afraid to look back, too frightened to think any longer about what Abel and his awesome object might mean. She had the van's engine throbbing with life almost before Andy, the last one in, could settle down and slam the passenger door. A human eye—*God!*

Abel, tall, withered, old and terrible, stood in the center of the roadway, holding the eyeball straight out as the van quickly backed away from him and roared onward along the narrow dirt road.

"I WARNED YOU!" he bellowed.

The red van gathered speed and rocketed out of sight. Chris did not look back. She couldn't. She was afraid to see the Angel of Death standing on that dirt road, pointing an accusing finger in her direction, like a dirty old man.

The others did not look back, either.

Abel was the very last straw of a very busy, overloaded morning. And he was in no way to start a pleasant weekend vacation. No way, man! as Chuck might have succinctly expressed it.

None of them could wait to get to Higgins Haven now, no matter what was waiting for them there. Anything was better than a nutty old man with an eyeball for company. Geezis! How loony could you and get?

Chris, Andy, Debbie, Vera, Shelly, Chili Chuck had no way of knowing that they were about to find out the hardest way just exactly how loony things could get.

The Crystal Lake maniac was a long way from done, and all the hounds of Hell were gathering at Higgins Haven.

GIVE HIM THE AXE!

The driveway approaching the lakeside cottage was rank with overgrowth. It curled and wandered through a maze of tall oak trees, trees which had been there long before the cottage had been built. Their heavy, gnarled branches hung low, looking like tired arms, ready to droop down on the driveway, as if to block all newcomers to the house. The house itself was a rustic, two-storied affair, picturesque if you cared for that sort of look, run-down if you were a realist. The place was in a relatively decent condition but its thoroughly weather-beaten aspect created an impression and atmosphere of great age, and perhaps a family history of some kind.

There was an elevated porch and curtained windows. The parking space before the structure was ample. On the left side of the driveway, some thirty yards diagonally across from the house, stood a tall red barn. This showed a hayloft equipped with the customary block and tackle needed to haul bales of hay into the loft's broad square window. Several bales stood there now, lining the penned-in area fronting the red barn. To the right of the house, an outhouse was placed like a lonely sentinel of some kind. The familiar half-moon shaped venthole marked the wooden door so that there was no doubt as to the nature of the structure. And off to the left of Higgins Haven, there was the large lake, complete with its knotty old dock and a very small tree-covered island parked squarely in the middle of the still waters. The whole of the area surrounding the property was a lush landscape of assorted foliage and plants. All in all, it was a serene, idyllic panorama, the ideal spot to take it easy and relax.

As the oncoming red van bumped its way along the dirt road and slowed down to a crawl to pass over the rickety, creaky, dilapidated wooden bridge that crossed a dried-up stream, all of Chris's friends marveled at the pastoral view, at the solitude and peacefulness of the setting. For Chris however, it was a trip back to another time.

But she controlled her innermost thoughts. No time now to brood.

At the bridge entrance, the rectangular sign with HIGGINS HAVEN carved into the old wood, still hung from the rotting post, as

always. Some things never changed, no matter how awful the past had been....

From the windows of the house, anyone could have seen the red van approaching. Anyone. Chris could almost feel a pair of unseen eyes trained on all of them. She repressed a shudder and eased the vehicle under the sweep of low-hanging branches fronting the house, then halted the van with a decisive foot on the brake.

Without waiting for the others, she jumped out and took a good long, hard look at the house. A collection of memories, all fresh and sharp, possessed her for a moment. Then she shrugged the unsettling images away and untied the rope of the tarpaulin which covered the bulk of the luggage riding on top of the van. She did it slowly and very thoughtfully, calling out loudly to her friends as she did so, "Let's bring in the luggage first. Then I'll give you a tour of the house and the barn and then we can hang out at the lake. All right?"

When she didn't get an immediate reply, she frowned and walked around to the other side of the van. Now she heard the sound of running feet and the shouts of laughter. The side doors of the van were wide open and no one was hanging around, obviously. Turning, she saw all her friends, the whole bunch of them, running pellmell towards the delightful lake. They had been unable to resist the allure of the shimmering waters and the sun-dappled landscape.

Debbie, running with the rest of them, turned and called back, "Come on down! Don't delay! Do it today!"

Chris shook her head, laughing. "You go ahead."

She did not see, almost directly behind her, the shadowy figure which had appeared at one curtained window of the living room of the cottage.

"I'm gonna take my bags into the house first and look around. Have fun, you goofs."

As she faced the house again, the watching shadow disappeared from view. Chris grabbed a piece of luggage in each hand and strode up the path to the porch steps and the front door, innocent and unafraid in the warm, bright light of the sunny day. Actually, her frame of mind was a good one, in spite of all her bad memories. It had been a great while since she had visited the old country home

and now she was somehow pleased to have this quiet moment all to herself without the others.

But the mood passed all too quickly. A cloud came up.

She didn't need her usual key for the front door. It was already open ever so slightly. And that was odd. Very odd. And not right.

Concern and fear flashed through her. She called out, uneasily, timidly. "Hello?"

There was no answer. The only sound was the distant hooting and horseplay of the people she had brought with her to Higgins Haven. Cautiously, she tried the door, pushing it open wider. She hesitated at first and then bravely took a step inside. The slightest noise, a tiny squeak, made her freeze where she stood and she raised her voice. crying out. "Who's there?"

She had her answer soon enough—a totally unexpected one.

From out of nowhere, in the gloom of indoors, a hand shot to her neck and pulled her backwards into the house. She started to scream as she felt a figure close in on her, and then the moment of horror and terror was gone. For the phantom attacker now was stealing nothing but kisses and embraces and she had recognized him. *Derek!*

Derek the tall. Derek the handsome. Derek the virile young stud of twenty-three. His eager mouth was on hers now. The mixture of relief and gladness she felt made her collapse in his arms. But she did not yield to the warmth he was feeling. She couldn't. Not under these circumstances, not in this house.

"It's good to see you, Chris," he whispered fervently into the forest of her blonde hair. She stared past his shoulder at the room, the furnishings, remembering another time, another set of circumstances. He sensed her withdrawal, for all his passion, and released her, stepping away from her. "Is it my imagination or did it just get cold in here?"

She had hardly heard him. Preoccupied with seeing the inside of Higgins Haven once more, she was wandering around the room, looking at everything, trying to get a fresh perspective on things.

She found the master bedroom and swung wide the door. She stood on the threshold, staring into the interior. Derek watched her, concerned. "Did I do something wrong, Chris?"

"No." She turned back to him, smiling softly. "It's just being here again. I know it's only been two years, but it feels like I've been away forever. Doesn't look like anything's changed. Even the paintings are still crooked like they always were."

She walked to the far wall and straightened a tilted seascape, an old oil painting her father had loved. Derek shook his head.

"You've certainly changed. Don't you even say ‘Hello, how are you?' anymore?"

"I'm sorry. Hello, Derek. How are you?"

"That's a start, at least." He crossed to her again, pulling her toward him for another kiss. She moved away quickly, avoiding him, putting the low center table of the room between them. "Could you just slow down, please? Even when we were kids, you were always so sure of yourself."

"So?" he said, mockingly, his eyes studying her with that damned coolness of his. "Should I have learned to be shy?"

"Well, *I'm* not sure of myself. And I *am* shy."

Behind them now, passing the porch window, a huge figure blotted out the daylight for a second, and then was gone. Neither of them had seen the fleeting figure. Chris was too intent on replying to the persistent Derek. He had not changed at all.

There's a whole weekend ahead of us. Let me get to know you again. Let me get to know this place again."

Derek considered that, and then his smile was the familiar one of old. "Okay, Chris. But there's only just so many cold showers I can take. Understood?"

She had to smile at that. The conceit of the guy! Changeless Derek.

"Understood," she agreed. "Now come on out side and help me with the bags."

They both headed for the front door, still unaware of the massive figure watching them from the porch. Bounding down the front steps, they busied themselves with the luggage. Derek said, "I'll get the bags off the top. You get the ones inside."

On the opposite side of the truck, Chris frowned at the sliding door. She had left it open and now it was closed. Unsure of herself,

she muttered aloud. "This door was open just a minute ago, wasn't it?"

"What?" Derek called from the other side of the van, unpacking the gear from the roof of the vehicle.

"Nothing," Chris said.

Sounds of the fun going on in the nearby lake reached them both. Chris grasped for the handle of the sliding door and whisked it to one side. Instinctively, she braced herself for something—anything—to leap out at her. Nothing did. Annoyed with herself for being so suspicious and on edge, she leaned into the van and grabbed the very first bag she saw. And now another hand sprang out of nowhere and fastened on her wrist. She let out a startled gasp and leaped backward, but it was only Shelly, sticking his face out from the interior of the van.

"That's my bag." he said in a low voice. "I'll take care of it."

"What're you doing in there?" Chris demanded, still frightened. "Why aren't you down at the lake with the others?"

Shelly showed his teeth in a resigned smile, still gripping his curious, precious little black bag. "Because they're skinny-dipping and I'm not skinny enough."

Chris did not laugh. She looked toward the lake, and saw Andy, Debbie and Vera frolicking about naked in the water, as Shelly had said. Chuck and Chili, fully clothed though they were, had both just dived off the dock with a double splash and combined shouts of glee. Everybody seemed to be having a great time and they hadn't even seen the house yet. Just as well, she thought. Let them enjoy themselves while they could—bad things happened soon enough, didn't they? And you were only young once, weren't you?

Sighing, she went back to helping Derek with the luggage.

Somewhere in the midst of the tall, overhanging oak trees, a bird of some kind cawed in the sunny daylight. A hawk, a crow or what? It was a curious sound to hear what with all the laughing and shouting going on at Higgins Haven, a strange and exotic noise. An omen?

She couldn't be sure.

The sun high overhead continued to blaze down as if it would never go out or nightfall would never come. Chris shook herself.

What a funny idea to have on such a beautiful day!

A crazy one, really.

That afternoon, it seemed a good plan to be alone with Derek and talk. The tall, dark guy, whatever else he was, was a good farmer, handy around a place like Higgins Haven. Chris made good use of him. While all the others were familiarizing themselves with the cottage and the land surrounding the place, Chris and Derek baled hay.

Strong Derek stood in the hayloft opening, working the block and tackle to hoist the bales of bound hay from the ground to their storage place. Chris remained below to grab the rope to hook it to the bales. It was tough work, but muscular Derek was used to such tasks and well-equipped to do the job. Chris marveled at his strength. The sun had moved across the heavens, but it was still very hot work.

Derek pulled in a swaying bale, grounded it somewhere inside, and then leaned from his perch to call down to her. "I never understood what all this hay was for, Chris. You don't have any horses. You never did."

He sent the rope back down to ground level. Chris grabbed it and hooked it on to another bale. "It's my father's idea. Every year he makes plans to buy a horse. And then, every year, he ends up buying this hay, but no horse. You figure it out. I can't."

Derek applied himself to the hoist, pulling forcefully. The bale rose from the ground, swaying. Derek laughed and then his tone became playful, teasing. "You realize, of course, I gave up an opportunity to spend the weekend with Mary Jo Conrad for this."

Chris, rolling another bale of hay into place, looked up, a wide grin on her lovely face. "You mean you actually gave up a chance to be with the Mary Jo Conrad?" She spread her hands before her own chest and made a mammoth cup of her hands and arms. "For little old me? I'm touched. I really am."

"That's right," he swore. "So help me."

"Boy, are you dumb!"

She signalled and he hoisted away again. But his grin was serious, somehow. "Okay, Chris... I know I'm just a country boy and my feelings don't really matter, but this is the sweat of a laborer on my

forehead, not a lover. Now I believe there's a time and place for everything. And I think this is the time and the place. You know what I mean. We gotta get organized here," he continued, breezily enough. "We should set aside at least three hours a day to fulfill our needs. An hour in the morning and two hours a night should be enough. If you agree, I agree."

Derek reached out to grab the hoisted bale of hay, only to find Chris hanging onto the rope, instead of the hay. She had let herself be pulled aloft to surprise him. He blinked, confused for a second.

She smiled coquettishly "Were you talking to me, sir?"

Derek with a wry smile let go of the rope. Chris fell earthward, letting out a shriek of dismay and disappointment.

But her playful yelp was suddenly drowned out in a long, terrible, blood-curdling scream which sounded from the house, or from that direction, at least. Derek shouted something. Springing unharmed from the hay, Chris quickly regained her feet and sprinted for the house, not waiting for Derek. From the second floor window of the cottage, a huge and massive frame stared down at her, concealed by the curtains.

Derek hit the rope to climb down but Chris was already bounding up the front porch of the house, disappearing inside. Her blood had turned cold again but her curiosity and her desire to help someone in trouble had spurred her into direct action without thinking of herself or the possible consequences. Fear sometimes acts like a two-edged sword.

The interior gloom of the house mocked her. It was completely silent. The awful scream had been cut off as if it had never happened.

"Is anyone in here?" Chris quavered.

There was no response. The silence was deafening.

"Is everything all right?" she demanded again, of the room, the furnishings, of anybody and anything. Again, no reply, only silence.

Derek came bounding in from outdoors, only seconds behind her.

"You okay? I saw you running...."

"I heard someone screaming." she explained. "You check down here. I'll check upstairs." She headed for the spiral staircase which wound upwards to the second floor balcony. Derek hesitated for a

second, undecided about leaving her alone, then rushed off to do her bidding. Chris hurried up the stairs and bee-lined for the door of the bedroom she had given to Andy and Debbie for the weekend. She peered inside, but she saw and heard nothing She turned down the corridor and spied Shelly's closed bedroom door. It was the next place to check.

"Shelly, are you up here?" she called out first.

If he was, he was not answering.

Heart beating strangely, she approached his door and pushed against the barrier. The door was stuck. She kicked at it with her foot. It swung open, slamming back against the inside wall. "Shelly?" she called once more. And then she walked in as bravely as she could.

The room was in order. Nothing seemed out of place or disarranged.

Chris took a few steps inside and looked about. There was no trace of pudgy Shelly. She spotted the heavy armoire and the one closet in the room. Something ticked and clicked in her brain. She reached out to the armoire and pulled open the door.

Her eyes popped and her heart stopped beating, all in one split second of near insanity. She could have gone out of her mind.

The overweight body of Shelly, an axe jutting from his skull, scarlet blood oozing profusely down his face, toppled forward, directly into her arms. Her lungs let go in a rising, horrified scream. Then his lifeless body was sliding from her arms, down her own body, thumping grotesquely to the floor at her very feet. She screamed again, in sheer, unbridled horror, closing her eyes against the awful sight.

Derek thundered into the room, shouting.

Chris swayed, forcing her eyes open. "He's dead... he's dead..." She could not look at Shelly's corpse on the floor.

"Oh, my God!" Derek gasped. He seized Chris around the waist. "No, don't look. Let's just get the hell out of here!"

Footsteps pounded. The room filled with faces Andy, Debbie, Vera. Chris caught herself, almost swooning.

"What's going on here?" Debbie demanded, almost petulantly.

"We heard screaming—" Vera said and then stopped.

They had all seen Shelly's body and reacted accordingly. The girls hid their faces and turned away, shuddering. Only Andy, oddly unaffected, or simply putting on a good show of nerve, was bending over the corpse, as if he were about to perform an autopsy. Debbie peered through her hands, "Don't touch him!" she begged.

Undaunted, he placed his hand on Shelly's stomach and began to tickle the corpse. Amazingly, foolishly, Shelly sprang to life, sitting erect and then jumping to his feet with an idiotic grin spread all over his face. He started to giggle uncontrollably Andy sighed, as if it were exactly what he had expected. "What a creep you are, Shelly!" The others gaped at Shelly, gasping incredulously. Chris's face went white at the monstrous deceit. Shelly, a little worried now, stammered hopefully, "I guess I fooled you good, huh?"

Chris, outraged at the rubber axe, the ketchup smears, rushed at him, fists up. "Why, you little bastard! I'll *kill* you!"

Practical joker Shelly retreated in a panic. The fake axe fell off his head. Chris struck out at him, pummeling his chest and body. Shelly fended her off and Derek helped, pulling her back.

"Leave him alone," he rasped in her ear. "He doesn't know any better."

"It was a joke," Shelly protested, lamely. "Just a joke. I didn't mean to...."

"You *never* mean to," Andy cut him off angrily "But you always go ahead and do it anyway, don't you?"

Vera was glaring disdainfully at Shelly. Her lovely face was almost ugly now. Somehow, she found the fat boy pitiful.

"I gotta get out of here," she declared. "I need some fresh air. Think I'll go get some booze."

Derek agreed to that. "Here," he said, taking his keys out of his jacket and tossing them to her. "Take my VW."

Chris had begun to cry helplessly. They all gathered around to comfort her. Vera stalked from the room, her tigerish figure swaying in rhythmic allure. Shelly stood mute, a helpless fat man, seeing the scorn in all eyes. The red smears on his face were truly ludicrous now.

His bad joke had laid an egg all over Higgins Haven.

Minutes later, outside where the barn doors were wide open, Vera Sanchez eased the Volkswagen beetle into the driveway, pointing its nose out toward the rickety bridge. It was a rusted-out old car whose engine made more noise than a boiler factory. Vera did not care. It would be good to get away for an hour—enough was enough.

Suddenly, the fat figure of Shelly came racing out of the house.

Cleaned of all his corpse make-up and blood, Shelly's face was a portrait of desperation. He caught up with Vera as the VW gained the old bridge. Shelly, running alongside, shouted through the window at Vera, "Let me go with you! Please! I gotta get away too!"

Without a word, she floored the pedal and zoomed away from him, leaving him forlorn. But then, amazingly the VW lurched to a full stop and the side door swung open like an invitation, only yards away.

Elated, Shelly bolted for the car and climbed in when he got there. The VW took off once more, zipping for the dirt road that led out to the highway. Vera drove like a racing car addict.

From the curtained windows of the house, the massive form looked out, seeing them leave. A quiet laugh filled the gloom of the upstairs living room. The stranger in the midst of all these young people bided his time. It was still daylight. The hours would pass soon enough. And this creature, whoever or whatever he was, was waiting for the night when darkness would fall and all sorts of terrible things were more likely to happen. The dark was a friend of the massive figure who was not a practical joker like Shelly. Not at all.

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The mutilated corpses of Harry and Edna had left a pall of horror over the police station. Veteran officers, despite the recent spate of slaughters, were once again asking each other, "*What's going on in this town? Who the hell is doing these things? And are we never going to be able to stop him them?*"

Nobody had the answers to those questions, least of all the chief of police.

When the coroner left his office with the ultimate autopsy verdict and the chief was alone with his thoughts, all he could do was stare out the big windows at the waning sunlight and wonder if this crime wave would cost him his job, as it very well could. And might.

Election time was coming up again in the fall. And Pinehurst County would be just like any other community when it came to expressing their dissatisfaction with a police chief who couldn't get the job done. The chief of police let out an enormous, tired sigh, but one single thought was paramount in his troubled mind.

This kind of thing had happened before. *Oh, had it ever!*

Dead, butchered bodies lying all over the countryside. Those murders were still unsolved, still open on the books. And if this were the same maniac and/or maniacs—the chief of police shuddered. Suddenly, his office was a very cold place to sit in and his police chief's chair uncomfortable.

DANGER IN BLACK

At the package store in town, Vera Sanchez made a lot of necessary purchases—several six-packs of beer, some bottles of cheap champagne and a flock of assorted munchies. A chastened Shelly wandered down the aisle, leafing through the magazine rack, trying to lose himself in the *Playboy* centerfold. The worn woman behind the counter was ringing up Vera's cash total on a noisy cash register.

"That'll be twenty-three fifty," the woman snapped, "and we don't take no food stamps."

Vera flung her a sneer and searched her pockets for money. She didn't have enough. "Shelly," she sang out, "I need some money. Throw me your wallet."

Shelly complied eagerly, tossing his billfold down the aisle to Vera. But as she reached up to clap her hands around it, she misjudged the distance. The wallet struck the side of her hand and dropped to the floor of the store. Making a face, she stooped to retrieve it, but someone beat her to it. A very black hand, wearing rings on each and every finger, scooped the wallet up fast. Vera straightened, scowling, to face a woman outfitted in startling skin-tight black leather, a stunning woman whose beauty, as vulgar as it was, was very impressive. The smirk on the woman's face was like some jungle cat's—waiting, watchful, poised to strike. Vera took an instant dislike to the lady and the feeling was obviously mutual.

On either side of the woman who seemed more like someone from Times Square in New York City than the country, were two equally black men, like bookends. The bigger, more strapping one, had a full set of gold teeth. His partner was sporting a bandana, one gold earring and the leather jacket that denotes a bike man. But all of them seemed of the same ilk. Vera could only glare at the black woman for a long moment. Shelly sauntered over to see what was wrong.

"Is... is everything all right?" he asked in a low voice.

Vera outstared the black woman. "Everything is gonna be fine, Shelly."

Shelly spied the wallet in the woman's hand. "Excuse me, but I believe that's mine..." he began.

The two black men moved forward, surrounding Shelly, leering down at him. The one with the gold teeth said to the one with the earring, "Make a wish, Loco."

Shelly was frightened, now. "Uh could I buy you two a beer or something?" He recognised danger when he saw it. And the black lady was pawing through the wallet as if staking a claim. Vera held out her hand.

"I'll take that now," she said in a cold, flat voice.

But the black woman was heedless of the request. She kept rummaging through Shelly's wallet. Suddenly she drew forth a shining packet and showing even very white teeth, read aloud from the covering:

"*A true Trojan... thin as a shadow, strong an a horse...*" She chuckled deep in her chest. "Hear that, Loco? You too, Ali. We got us a real big man here!"

Ali and Loco had now lifted Shelly easily from the floor by each grabbing an elbow. Then they dropped him almost as fast. Shelly scrambled erect, face reddening. Gold-toothed Ali roared and earringed Loco echoed him. The black woman let out a loud, raucous laugh.

Vera had taken all she was going to take. She grabbed for the wallet but the black woman was quicker. She pulled her hand back.

"Attaway, Fox," Ali rumbled proudly. "Show her all the good moves."

Fox almost bowed at him but her attention was still on Vera.

"Didn't your mama teach you manners. girl? If you want something, you ask *nice!*"

Shelly rallied a little. "Please, Vera... be cool."

Vera, teeth clenched now, said, "May I *please* have the wallet?"

"You mean," Fox snorted, "may we please have the wallet... *ma'am*."

With great difficulty, hanging on to her calm, Vera repeated the request. "May we please have the wallet... *ma'am*?"

"Now that's good, girl. That's real *nice!*"

Her cohorts, Ali and Loco, were enjoying every second, every word of this confrontation.

Fox tossed the wallet to Vera, as if it were an afterthought.

Vera and Shelly paid for their purchases and the woman behind the cash register, who had witnessed the whole scene and stayed out of it, was glad to see them go. Who needed trouble?

Outside the store again, Vera was still smarting from the encounter but Shelly was far more practical about their close call.

"Are they following us?" he wondered.

"No," Vera snapped.

"Good." Shelly heaved a sigh of relief.

They quickly stuffed all the goodies in the rear of the VW. Vera handed Shelly the car keys. "You drive, huh? The way I feel I'd probably run us into a tree or something."

"Next time," Shelly vowed, climbing behind the wheel, "I'll know how to handle a situation like that." He keyed the ignition lock. "Let's just hope 'next time' isn't too soon."

Just as the words left his mouth, Ali emerged from the package store. Seeing the black giant so soon again was too much for Shelly. Nervously, he started the VW, throwing it into gear and hitting the gas pedal. Mistakenly, the car was in reverse. It lurched backward before Shelly could correct the error. The mistake was compounded by a terrible sound of crashing metal and screeching rubber. Shelly had backed into two shining, streamlined, souped-up motorcycles. And there was little doubt who the owners of the machines could be. Bad luck, okay!

Shelly and Vera, whirling to see out the back window, had their worst fears certified. "*Aw, shit!*" Shelly gasped, with emphasis.

"Aw shit is right!" Vera agreed. "Here comes the Unjolly Black Giant!"

Ali was coming toward them now on a dead run, his right hand closed around a heavy metal chain which he had tugged from his thick bikeman's belt. Vera swallowed, hard. "Let's get outa here!"

Shelly shifted gears like a maniac. The VW shot ahead, but Ali had placed himself unyieldingly in front of the oncoming car, standing his ground like a Colossus, or Horatio at the bridge.

"Hold on!" Shelly roared, hitting the brakes. The VW stopped on a dime, only inches from Ali. All considerations aside, Shelly didn't want to run him down like a dog. That was all the weakness and charity that Ali needed. His gold teeth flashed in a blinding smile. The late afternoon sun glinted off his metallic molars. They tried to smile back at him but it was a waste of time.

The heavy metal chain swung like a bullwhip in his hand and arced toward them in a deadly line. The windshield gave way with a bursting of glass and windshield wipers. Vera and Shelly ducked in pure reflex. Ali drew closer, wrapping the heavy chain about one ham of a fist, and drove his arm through the driver's side window, a battering ram of force and power. The window disintegrated. Vera shuddered, recoiling in terror. Ali's gleaming grin broadened. The arm drew back again for one more final, telling blow. But Shelly responded for once with a speed and practicality that left Vera marveling. The fat boy reversed the VW rapidly, raced back several yards and then shot forward again, heading for the alternate exit of the package store parking lot.

Ali dashed for his toppled motorcycle, the gleaming grin gone, his long legs pumping. The VW appeared to be making a clean break, but amazingly, to Vera, Shelly did not drive off to safety. Instead, the VW spun in a sharp U-Turn and headed back the way they had come.

"What're you doing?" Vera shouted incredulously.

"He went too far this time. I'm mad!"

Hunched over the wheel like a racing car driver, Shelly thunderbolted the VW straight for Ali. The black man had righted his bike and was mounting up. But the engine wasn't turning over. Then he saw the vengeful VW bearing down on him seemingly from out of nowhere.

His face broke in horror and surprise. He leaped from his vehicle and got out of the way just in time.

The VW ran right over his fallen motorcycle, reducing its value and working condition quite a great deal. And then Derek's rusted-out car shot away clear, heading for freedom, the highway and the road back to Higgins Haven. But not before Fox and Loco had come running from the package store to see what all the noise was about.

The trio of blacks were reduced to impotent, fist-shaking losers as Shelly drove off with Vera, a true winner for perhaps the very first time in his fat life.

"I did it!" he exulted with a hoarse shout. "I did it! Didn't I do it?"

"You did it!" Vera agreed happily, seeing him in a new light. "And you were great, Shelly."

"I was great!" he repeated the words, savoring each and every one of them. He floored the gas pedal, racing back to the cottage. He couldn't wait to tell the gang what had happened or to hear how Vera would back him up.

Unfortunately, as ye sow so shall ye reap, as the Bible says. Shelly and Vera had made three enemies. Three very bad enemies, with memories like elephants.

Fox, Ali and Loco were not ones to let this sort of one-upmanship pass. No way, man, as Chuck would have said. There were now three black shadows in the lives of the young people who had come to Higgins Haven for a restful weekend. Like bad pennies, Fox, Ali and Loco were going to come back.

As if one maniac and one Crystal Lake Killer wasn't enough.

Or two?

Nobody had ever been able to say for sure.

The wave of unsolved murders, the countless, slaughtered corpses which had plagued Crystal Lake in Pinehurst County for so many long years, was still a blot on the history of the territory.

The mammoth blot had only spread and widened as the years and the corpses mounted, baffling all the local authorities. And there was no blotter in sight.

The VW made good time back to the cottage but Vera was still too overcome with the realization of something. Her dark eyes were gloomy.

"I can't believe this. I was promised a quiet weekend in the country, and look at everything that's been happening."

Shelly was still too happy to be upset.

"Look at it this way... things can only get better. Right?"

Wrong.

The sun was just beginning to go down, dipping fast like an orange ball balancing itself on the far horizon. Night was coming on again, and there would come strangers in the night.

As well as *Death*.

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"Forget it, Ali. T'aint worth it."

"The hell I will! I paid a lotta good bread for that bike."

"What you gonna do then? Walk after them Charlies?"

"Hush your mouth, woman. You do what I tell you. I'm still Boss Man of this outfit until someone says different. Or tries different. Loco, go find us some wheels."

Fox and Loco exchanged helpless glances in the parking lot of the package store. Big Ali was literally seething. They had never seen him so worked up, so downright mad. They couldn't really blame him, though. Shelly's stunt had really wrecked the bike.

Loco fingered his earring, grunted, and went scrounging around the parking lot checking the parked cars for keys left in ignitions.

Fox patted the fullness of her leather-bound hips and shook her head at her main man. Ali's gold teeth shone in a fixed smile, but his eyes were glittering like the many rings on his big black hands.

He was crazy about rings, just as Fox was. More importantly, getting even meant a lot to him, especially with white dudes.

THE NIGHT VISITORS

Six o'clock had come.

The sun, dying now, splashed a golden orange glow over the region of Crystal Lake. The landscape was alive with color. As daylight was ending, shadows began to steal through the tall oaks and across the cottage, the barn and the outhouse. Never had the area looked more pastoral or beautiful. All of Chris's friends had found things to keep them busy after the bad scare of Shelly's faked death. Chris herself had gone jogging in the woods to keep her mind off things. The others had found time to resume some pleasant habits.

Andy was on the porch working out. His tall, slim, athletic body was no accident. He was doing strenuous exercises to keep in condition, a series of calisthenics designed to maintain his splendid physique. Chuck and Chili were watching him from the porch swing, indolently admiring his moves. But the limit of their participation was the cocaine they were sharing, dreamy-eyed. Andy's performance, as inspiring as it was, only caused them to rock faster in the swing. Still, Chuck felt a twinge of guilt.

"Maybe we should do some exercise," he suggested to Chili.

She shook her head, raised her coke spoon to her nose and inhaled deeply and fervently. "This is all the exercise I need, Chuckie baby." She snorted her nose candy with a prodigious blast upward. Chuck grinned foolishly.

When Debbie came jogging out of the woods, shapely figure running hard, she was soon followed by Chris. Both of them were perspiring freely, yet they had never looked lovelier.

And now, the battered, war-torn Volkswagen crawled into view, coming over the small wooden bridge towards the house. When it reached the winding dirt road, everybody could see that something had happened to Derek's buggy—something bad. The damage was all too plain even from a distance. Chris felt a stab of fear but shook it off, and Debbie frowned. But both of them joined Andy, Chuck and Chili in front of the barn where Shelly had slid the VW to a stop. Shelly and Vera Sanchez climbed out wearily. Chuck put his whole

arm through the space where the windshield had once been. "Where's your windshield, man?"

Debbie blurted, "What happened to you guys? Are you all right?"

Vera and Shelly reached in for the bags of groceries, then handed them over to Chili and Chuck. Vera shrugged her shoulders. "We had a slight misunderstanding with some motorcycle gang. They came in threes. All black. But Shelly made them see the error of their ways." She put an arm around him in approval. He grinned, as happy as a mudturtle in a swamp. "It was nothing," he declared, as heroically as he could. Everybody smiled and clapped their hands. Then they all headed for the house, with Vera elaborating on the details.

Nobody saw the barn door inch open, with a low creak of sound. The huge, massive man who had skulked and observed all day, drew back into the shadows again, still unobserved by any of the young people.

Derek met the group halfway up to the house. His dark face was a picture of shock and resentment.

"My beautiful car! What did you do to it, for God's sakes?"

Vera and Shelly, embarrassed and feeling awkward, tried to explain. Derek was beyond reason so Vera handed him the keys. "We're really sorry, but it wasn't our fault. Honest," she told him.

Shelly nodded eagerly. "A few minor repairs and it'll be good as new." Derek was no longer listening. He ran down to the VW and examined it, circling like a mother hen, touching all the bruises and cuts and hurts. He cursed out loud. Glaring back at Vera and Shelly, he exploded. "That's it! I've had it! I thought it would be good for me and us to spend some time together—" he was shouting for Chris' benefit now, and she knew it. "—but I got more than I bargained for!"

Angrily, he pulled the door back and climbed into the VW. Shelly and Vera, powerless to explain further, went on into the house with the others. Only Chris lingered, going to Derek and leaning down to the driver's window to talk to him. The motor roared into life.

"Where are you going, Derek?"

"Away from here."

"Stay with me."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want you to."

She had struck the right vein, whether by design or truth. He would never know. "You don't play fair, do you, Chris?" Finally, he sighed and pushed out the door for her. "Get in."

Off to the right, behind a tall oak, Andy and Debbie were kissing with a great deal of warmth, desire and affection.

Derek and Chris did not see them as the VW eased toward the rickety bridge. Andy and Debbie paid no attention to them at all. They had other matters on their minds.

"Why don't we take a swim?" Debbie asked, breaking away from the kiss. Andy blinked and shook his head.

"I don't know...."

"We'd be all alone," she said, seductively. "We could do anything we wanted and nobody would see."

"Sounds disgusting," Andy declared solemnly.

"Let's go."

He grabbed her hand and started to run with her to the lake. As they broke past the van, Debbie stopped. "You go ahead. I'm gonna get a blanket." The VW had disappeared now behind the tall wall of trees fronting Higgins Haven, hiding it from the highway. Andy continued on happily toward the lake, walking on his hands in an excess of athletic, romantic happiness. Debbie laughed and slid open the side door of the red van. A nice stillness had settled over the lake and vicinity. It was going to be a lovely night.

She crawled into the van, exploring for the blanket.

She did not see the dark, booted feet approaching furtively, trying not to rustle a single leaf on the country earth. Her shapely rear end was outthrust from the vehicle as she searched. The owner of the booted feet now edged around her, because she had suddenly backed out of the van, clutching the blanket. It was a very close call for both people. Debbie was scampering down to the lake, hugging the blanket, without ever having noticed the prowler or suspected that one was there.

The intruder ducked behind the opposite side of the red van.

Debbie joined Andy down by the lake's edge. The sun was now sinking behind the horizon, and the tall trees had walled it out much

earlier. The cottage and the lake area were now thoroughly drenched in half-light. Gloom. Dusk. The setting was something out of Edgar Allan Poe, haunting and beautiful and somehow weird.

And not a little frightening.

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The booted prowler was no stranger, really. Vera and Shelly would have recognized him immediately and shuddered at the sight of him. He was large and formidable and black and he was no less than Ali, the gold-toothed giant of their package store and parking lot encounter.

Now he was carrying an empty tin gas can and a siphon and scanning the area for other bodies. There were none. Debbie was already down at the lake. Ali made a signalling motion with his hands. The bushes behind him stirred and Fox and Loco emerged, crouching low so as not to be seen from the house. Ali had already begun to unscrew the cap of the van's gasoline tank. Fox's shining eyes held worry, unusual for her.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this, Ali."

Loco grumbled at that. "We gotta even the score, don't we?"

Ali laughed a mean laugh. "Nobody's gonna get hurt, baby."

He stuck the siphon down into the fuel tank and placed the gas can on the ground below. Loco reached for the siphon eagerly. "Let me do it." Ali firmly pushed his hand away. "I know what I'm doing, man."

While the men worked the emptying-the-gas tank routine, Fox's attention was drawn to the barn just behind them, its two doors almost tempting her to walk in. She wandered off, curious, and tried the doors. They opened. She waited, making sure no sound was heard, and then slipped inside, closing the barriers quietly behind her. Ali and Loco did not see her go. They were too busy with the van.

The last of the sunlight, spears thick with dust filled the musty interior of the old structure. Fox scanned the premises with fresh eyes. Her face lit up with the dawning smile of a city child in a country store, seeing a new world for the first time, trying to decide

which area to explore first. And the street urchin that Fox had once been was also beguiled by the interior of a country barn, something she had never seen before. This red barn was a typical, right-out-of-the-catalogues barn, filled with a variety of heavy duty tools, some rusting saw horses, wooden benches and ladders, a horse stall, a hay bin, haystacks and a second floor hayloft. Several storage rooms were on view, too. Fox marveled at it all. Fascinated, she wandered through this rustic wonderland.

In her high-heeled boots, she had some trouble maneuvering around on the hay-covered floor. The smell of the place filled her nostrils like some rare perfume. It was all so new to her.

As she approached the tool shed, one of her heels stuck deep into a sticky patch of mud. She staggered slightly. To stop her fall, she clawed out for the toolshed handle. The rotting old door gave way with the weight and force of her hand, unhinging with age. Fox fell to the ground, her face landing only inches away from a pitchfork's prongs thrusting upward. Her eyes almost popped out of her head at the nearness of the miss. She rose, kicking the implement out of the way, then dusted herself off, her heart pounding. She looked upward. The loft area was above her, with a wooden ladder leading to it. She didn't hesitate, but ascended the old ladder very slowly, intrigued with the barn and its aura.

A bale of hay, dislodged somehow in her climb, shot past her and thudded to the floor of the barn. Fox chuckled low in her throat and kept on climbing. Soon she disappeared through the loft flooring overhead and was gone.

Ali and Loco had barely noticed her wandering off until they finished filling the gas can and reached for another. It was going to take three cans at least to empty the red van's tank. That ought to do it.

Ali stuck the siphon in his mouth and proceeded to draw on it to fill the second can. Loco kept the container in place for him to catch all the fluid. Both men were grinning from ear to ear.

"Take this into the barn," Ali directed, handing Loco the one filled can, "and start pouring. And find Fox!"

Loco nodded. Nobody ever argued with Ali. He was just too damn big. So the slightly smaller man crept toward the barn, ducking past the huge over grown oak tree that stood between the barn and the red van. But just as he was about to enter, he heard a low, wailing sound, Fox sounded like a wounded animal. He spun around and looked up. His eyes popped, too. He had hardly expected anything like this, even from a tigress like Fox. What a woman!

Fox came swinging out of the hayloft opening like Tarzan, on the hanging rope attached to the block and tackle, just like a kid having a high old time. Loco watched, baffled. The woman's lithe body was like a snake clinging to the swinging rope. Back and forth, back and forth.

"*Whoaaa....!*" Fox sang out happily, heedless of who might hear her. Loco panicked, looking around fearfully, then up at Fox again.

"What the hell you doin?" he shouted in a loud whisper. "Get off that fool thing!"

She had disappeared from view once more, through the square opening of the loft. A second later, she reappeared, swinging far out on the rope again. Loco's mouth dropped open. The woman was crazy!

"This feels so *goooodddd!*" Fox shouted again, and flew back out of sight as before. Loco was getting desperate. He looked back toward Ali, concerned. The big fellow was still busy with the siphon routine but his view of the barn was obstructed by the oak tree. Ali seemed not to have heard Fox and all her whooping.

Loco craned his neck upward. "Ali's gonna be pissed if you don't stop screwin' around, woman. We got work to do!"

This time the rope came sailing out empty, with no one hanging from it. It dangled, twirling lazily.

There was dead silence. Loco gaped, shook his head and then raced into the barn, not knowing what to think, not wanting to think at all. If that damn woman was playing more games....

The interior of the barn was gloomy, mysterious, alien to Loco. It had been getting darker by the minute and now deep shadows lay over everything. Loco advanced cautiously, not wanting to bump into anything and make a racket. "Fox?" he called in a loud stage whisper.

"Where are you?" She did not answer. Loco cursed and moved further into the barn. "Stop foolin' around. You're screwin' everything up!"

Still no answer. Not a peep.

"Shit," Loco said.

And then he heard a noise, a banging of some kind, like something hitting against the wall or the side of the barn. Loco spotted the ladder, saw the second level and quickly knew what he had to do. He mounted the old rungs like a scurrying rat.

"You've had it now, woman!" he growled. "I'm mad!"

He came through the square opening and stepped out on the floorboards. The deep shadows hid the corners of the loft. He had to squint his eyes to see. Now, from directly behind him, came the banging sound again. He whipped around.

He could not believe or credit what his eyes now told him, what his brain said he saw; it was too much, too soon.

And it was Fox!

Her body, the tigerish, leather-clad, booted shapeliness of her, was raised totally off the ground. She was suspended in mid-air, impaled by a pitchfork, which pinned her to the wall. And her eyes-*God!*

They were propped open in a fixed, deathly stare while her boots still kicked against the wooden wall with final, pitiful spasms of life.

Blood flowed from each and every penetration, coursing down her body in ragged, crooked streams of scarlet.

The horrific tableau was too much for Loco.

He turned to run, his brain numbed, his heart almost stopped.

And then his eyes registered recognition, shock and horror. It was as if he had run smack into his own death. An onrushing pitchfork, coming out of the gloom, rocketed into his wide-open face. He tried to shrink, grow smaller. It was no use. Fiery prongs cut deep into his stomach, traveling in a flaming, violent battering ram of agony and violence. Blood torrented upward, flooding Loco's chest, throat and face. The pitchfork came out his back like an Indian arrow.

He staggered, the world ending for him in a haze of pain and awesome, ugly horror.

The pitchfork handle jutted out of his gut.

Fox's corpse kept kicking its heels against the barn wall.

Somewhere in that Death Barn, a massive shadow lurked, waiting to strike again. *Wanting to*.

***

Outside the red barn, carrying two jugs of gasoline, one in each hand, Ali paused at the entrance. He knew now that Fox and Loco were inside so he kicked at the door, knowing one of them would let him in. Far off in the lake Debbie and Andy were splashing in the water, all unaware of the murderous blood-bath going on no more than one hundred yards away. Ali growled impatiently when no answer came to his kick.

"Loco—Fox—open this damn door!"

Frustrated with the lack of response, Ali set the cans down and pried open the door himself. He fumbled his way inside, grunting. As soon as he was in the gloomy interior, he could hear footsteps clomping about over head in the loft. "What the hell are you two doin' up there?" he demanded. Again, no reply of any kind. Ali fumed and went to the ladder, looking up. His mouth dropped open and his eyes did a double-take. Directly above him, he saw Loco's form—

And down it came, plummeting, the pitchfork yet sticking from the dead flesh. The body hit Ali squarely and down both men went.

Ali stuggled erect, pushing Loco away, and then he saw the pitchfork, the blood and the glazed eyes of his partner. He cried out for Fox to answer him, his blood and heart turning cold with terror and rage. He bellowed up into the darkness of the loft, a deep, mournful bellow, as he backed away from Loco's pitiful corpse, horrified.

Above him, for a split second, the huge form was visible. A shaft of early moonlight washed over the stalking murderer. But Ali had seen him just before he stepped back into the darkened stalls again.

"Come down here! Out where I can see you! You hear me?"

Maddened now, desperate, Ali ran to the open tool shed where the array of gardening tools lined the shelves. Reaching in, he seized a rusted machete, hefted it, and his golden teeth gleamed in a deadly

smile. He whirled, watching the shadows. "Where's my woman?" he shouted. "What have you done to her?"

The deadly silence of the barn did not dismay him. He circled about warily, peering at every shadow, every nook. He knew the man he had seen was no longer in the loft. He sensed somehow that he had come down. "When I find you, you bastard, you're a dead man!"

He ventured into the darkened stalls, unable to see very well. But he was a man of purpose, a man mad enough to kill. He started to swing wildly with the machete, making murderous arcs through empty spaces, trying to flush whoever it was who had done in poor Loco and maybe Fox.

The sob in his throat ended as a huge, heavy figure came hurtling down at him from the top of several piles of baled hay. Ali, quick on his big feet, rotated out of harm's way, and swung the machete viciously toward the head of the figure before him.

But the shadowy form moved quickly, too quickly, ducking under the slashing blade and striking like a cobra.

Ali, left off-balance by a blow that had not found its mark, never saw the heavy plumber's wrench that came out of the darkness and smashed full force into the side of his black face, caving in his skull. He went down and stayed down, twitching but once.

And the massive figure stepped back into the shadows again, for he heard the sound of voices from outside the barn, drawing nearer. Debbie and Andy, returning, dripping, from the joyous, free-wheeling romp in the lake.

Ali was a silent mass of death on the floor of the barn.

Debbie had a blanket wrapped around her wet body. Andy was walking on his hands again toward the barn. The killer retreated deeper into the darkened recesses of the barn.

"What're you doing?" Debbie laughed.

"We haven't been in the barn yet. Let's take a look."

"Not now, Andy. I'm cold."

The young athlete flipped right side up and moved to the grimy window. Shading his eyes, he tried to peer inside. He couldn't see a thing. It was too dark in there.

"How about it, Deb... a little roll in the hay?"

She frowned at that. "You can play with yourself! I'm going in the house." Turning, she trotted up the path to the porch.

Andy lingered only a second longer, then shrugged, and followed her lead. In a moment, they both disappeared into the house.

The moon had come out now, shining plainly in the dark sky, shining down on a barn with three dead people in it, and one murderer.

A monster from the past called *Jason*.

Within the cozy walls of the cottage, the fireplace was going. Warmth had made the old house very comfortable. Chuck and Chili, left to themselves momentarily while Shelly and Vera were off somewhere, were almost at a loss as to how to amuse themselves.

But Chuck's lazy eyes always knew the solution ever at hand.

"Chili—how you feeling?"

"Like I wanta travel someplace. Real fast."

"Check. Get us some nose candy and we'll try for the moon."

Dutifully, she trotted off in search of some of their own particular brand of lightning, funny cigarettes and cocaine spoons. The bong was tucked away safely in their bedroom. Maniacs and murder sprees were the farthest thing from their minds. Death was for old folks, not young ones.

But the night ahead would prove them wrong.

There was a monster loose in their very midst.

THE DARK REVEALS

Derek had parked the battered Volkswagen just off the roadway which overlooked the cove not far from the glistening waters of the lake. The full moon bathed the landscape with soft white light. It was a perfect time of evening, ideal for a boy and girl who had once shared many a romantic feeling.

The dark, handsome youth had flicked on the VW's headlights, shooting them right toward the lake where they stabbed the surface with brilliant gleams of illumination. Chris had gone to the water's edge, staring out over the lake to the far shore. Derek came up to her, smiling. "Is that better, Chris?"

She nodded, her shapely back to him. Her arms were crossed, rubbing the chill from her body. Derek took off his blue jean jacket and wrapped it about her shoulders. She sat down and he did, too. For a long moment, they were both silent, thinking of the past, of many things. It had been a long, long time until this reunion. Too long, perhaps. People could change. Especially young ones.

The silence became awkard, uncomfortable. Derek fought it.

He tried to put his arm around her but she tensed up. He wanted to kiss her, but he couldn't. He sensed her withdrawal. Resignedly, he turned away and stared at the lake again. Chris watched him, seeing once more the handsome profile accentuated in all its fine sensuality and vulnerability. The moonlight bathed him in silver.

"You know," Derek murmured. "I'm not sure I could live anywhere else. The nights are always so peaceful and quiet out here."

"It's deceiving." Chris blurted, remembering.

He turned to her. "What do you mean?"

"The quiet can fool you. It fooled me. You can never be sure of what's out there. Hiding. Waiting..."

He stood up then, frustrated by her strange moods. Moving to the water's edge, he scooped up some pebbles and began to toss them into the still lake. "Why did you come back here, Chris?" He didn't look at her when he asked that question.

"To prove something to myself... to prove that I'm stronger than I think I am."

"And what about us?"

"I'm here with you," she replied, simply. "Can't that be enough for you? For now?"

"I don't know. I don't see you for months on end, and when I do, you put this wall between us. How do I break through?"

She didn't answer, just stared down at the dark earth. He forgot about tossing pebbles and came back to her, sitting down again.

"What happened that night?" he asked, softly.

"You promised you'd never ask me."

Derek shook his head at that. "I didn't see you or talk to you again for almost a year after that night. And no one would tell me anything. You're not being fair to me. I don't know what to do anymore. Can't you trust me enough to tell me what happened?"

His tone was so earnest, so loving. Chris felt her heart go out to him. She stared deep into his eyes for a long moment. And then —"Everything is so clear in my mind. About that night. I can see it all as if it were happening right now...."

Derek listened, rapt.

He had waited a long time for this tale—too long.

***

At that moment, in the living room of Higgins Haven, Andy and Shelly were entertaining Debbie and Vera with a juggling act. They were trying to outdo one another with handfuls of fruit, seeing who could keep more in the air. Vera and Debbie could barely restrain their boredom. Chuck and Chili had taken the wisest course. Both were dead to the world on the living room couch, fast asleep. Cocaine sniffing and the country air had taken their toll.

"Do you give up?" Shelly jibed at Andy as he rotated four apples in the air with practised skill.

"No!" Andy shouted. He had opted for oranges because he'd thought they'd be easier. But Shelly was topping him with red apples,

whirling quickly. Vera and Debbie looked to each other for a way out. Watching boys juggle fruit wasn't exactly a thrill a minute.

"Give up yet?" Andy panted desperately.

"Not on your life! Never!" Shelly shouted.

Debbie winked at Vera Sanchez.

"I know how to stop this. Watch Mama."

She got up from her seat, crossed over to Andy, and Vera, taking her cue, went to the fireplace which was raging with a full-bodied flame. She poked aimlessly into the fire with a heavy poker. Debbie stretched her arms so that her full breasts rose formidably. "I'm so hot—I'm gonna have to get undressed."

With that loud announcement, she turned and sashayed toward the staircase. The allure of her shifting hips and buttocks caught Andy's roving eye. The ignored oranges rained down on the floor. "You win," he smiled at Shelly and raced after Debbie. Shelly blinked and then stopped juggling his apples. No contest anyway.

Chili and Chuck were still asleep and Vera Sanchez was alone at the fireplace, looking thoughtful Shelly smiled sheepishly in her direction. "I guess that leaves me and you... sort of."

Inspired by the notion, he walked toward her and juggled anew. The apples flashed in the air and in his hands. Vera nodded approvingly. "You're very good at that."

But she turned back to the fire, looking down.

Shelly ceased juggling. A determined look swept over his chubby face. He took up his stance beside Vera Sanchez, ready to say something he had never said before to any girl, because he never could. But now with Vera—Vera was different somehow.

"Vera..." he began, awkwardly, "you and I have a chance, *had* a chance—to really get to know one another today. I like you—very much. I was thinking that maybe...."

"Don't say any more," she interrupted quickly.

Stopped dead in mid-flight, Shelly felt like biting his tongue. Instead he lowered his head and stopped talking, dejected.

Vera, with all the kindness she could muster, put her hand on his arm. "I'm going outside for a few minutes. We'll talk when I get back. Okay?" Her tone was low and very very soft.

"Okay," he mumbled, but he didn't believe her.

Nobody loves a fat man, right? *Right!*

Vera Sanchez left him then, still staring down at the blazing fireplace. He was turning the apples over and over in his pudgy hands. His back was to her, so she could not see the disappointment and hurt sketched in morose, sorrowful lines all over his face.

She was outside, breathing deeply of the country air and drinking in the moon-splashed beauty of her surroundings. She did not see the hulking, gigantic shadow of Jason, standing at the living room window, spying on Shelly as he stood before the fireplace, still fingering his apples. Jason's shadow almost blotted out the window.

Vera Sanchez walked quietly down to the lake. Night creatures and frogs made curious noises in the darkness.

The moon seemed to be directly above Higgins Haven like a spotlight on a stage—a stage set for more massacre, mayhem and horror.

***

Upstairs in the house, Andy and Debbie were having a problem, lovely kind of problem. It had to do with a hammock and making love. The easy way—or the hard way.

Their mutual bedroom was equipped with a hammock slung between a chair and the bed. Andy was perplexed by the arrangement.

"How do we do it, Deb?"

"First we take off our clothes," she deadpanned.

"Then you get on top of me or I get on top of you."

Andy bridled. "I know how to do it. I mean, how do we do it in the *hammock?*"

Debbie, without another word, removed her top garment. When it came away, her absolutely perfect young breasts rippled into view. She smiled a woman's smile. Andy's eyes shone with fervor.

"Andy—think you can figure it out?"

His eyes fixed like radar on her twin wonders, he gulped fervently, "I'll think of something, I'm sure."

He wrapped his arms around her and she tilted her face upward. His kiss and the ones that followed promised all sorts of pleasures and accomplishments in the next hour or more.

Downstairs, Shelly still stood before the fire place.

The hulking Jason watched. His breathing was deep, ragged.

Vera Sanchez had reached the lake's moon-limned shore. She had a lot of thinking to do. Chuck and Chili were sleeping through this eventful night, like orphans unaware of the storm that was brewing, the storm so sure to come before this night was done.

***

The headlights on Derek's Volkswagen had dimmed. The dark and desolate landscape seemed a proper setting for the tale that Chris was unfolding. She was sitting close to Derek now, somber, low-voiced. And he did not want to interrupt her until she was through.

"You're right, Derek. I should have told you everything a long time ago. But I just couldn't."

He squeezed her hand. It was almost icy. "Look—you don't have to do this if you don't..."

"I want to," she said, very sure of something now. "I want you to know what happened that night so you'll understand."

They both stared out over the water, as if by mutual consent. Derek was silent and Chris began her narrative.

"I don't know if you remember, but when you dropped me at the house that night, it was very late... too late. You knew my parents would be waiting up for me. We'd had such a great time, I didn't care. And you were right. They were waiting up for me. As soon as I got in the door, they began to yell and curse me. They made me so angry that I told them we'd been sleeping together. It just slipped out. My mother slapped me. That was the first time she'd ever hit me. I couldn't believe it. I ran out of the house and into the woods as fast and as far as I could run. I was crying. I wanted to punish them. I decided to hide out all night. I'd get them so worried that they'd be sorry for what they did. The woods were cold and damp from the

rain. I found a dry spot under a rotted oak tree and I guess I fell asleep...."

She paused to take a deep breath. Derek said nothing.

"All I can remember next is being startled out of sleep by the sound of footsteps. I was sure it was my father, so I hid behind the tree and listened for him. But the footsteps just stopped. The woods were dark. I couldn't see anything. I got scared..."

Her voice rose, intensifying as she relived the vivid memory.

"Then I heard a crackling noise behind me. I turned around—and—oh, God—standing there was this hideous looking man! So grotesque, he was almost inhuman. He had a knife and he started to slash away at me, again and again...." A shudder ran through her.

"I was so hysterical, I don't know how I was even able to think. But I kicked the knife out of his hand and ran and ran and ran. But he was right behind me. He was big, but so fast I couldn't shake him. He caught me and pulled me down. I was screaming but who could hear me out there in that wilderness? Then—oh, God—he dragged me by the hair along the ground. The branches and rocks ripped my skin. My arms were raw and burning. I was kicking and yelling. But then—I don't know I blacked out. I just don't know what happened after that...." Her voice broke on a low sob and Derek stroked her hair very gently. A bird cawed somewhere in the dark of the night.

"It's all right. You're all right."

She controlled herself, breathing deeply again.

"When I woke up I was in my own bed. And my parents have never said a word about it, ever. They act as if the whole thing never happened. But it did... and even though I just wanted to forget, I can't. I'll never forget that horrible face—*never!*"

As if for emphasis, the headlights on the VW winked off with stunning abruptness. Chris, responding to any and all stimuli, blurted fearfully, "*Who's there?*"

There was no one in sight, no dark, unknown shadows.

Derek, to appease her, said, "It's the battery, dammit."

"You sure?" she quavered.

"Sure. Come on. We'll take a look. You'll see."

When he tried to start the VW, the empty *whirring* produced by turning the ignition key convinced them both. Derek took a flashlight from the glove compartment and then took Chris's hand.

"It's no problem. We'll just walk back. Come on."

Hand in hand, they started down the wooded path, guided by the flashlight's beam and the shining moon overhead.

With the tale as last told, Chris felt something akin to relief. It was right that Derek should know, good that she had told him. Still, there was the awful mystery of it all—Mom and Dad pretending it had never happened, playing dumb about it all. And that man with the hideous face....

She huddled against Derek's tall strength as they maneuvered the trail back to the house. The foliage was so thick and high, it was a good thing the moon was so bright, flashlight or not.

Neither Derek or Chris was close enough to see Vera Sanchez arriving on the old dock at lakeside. The low waterfall at the far end was also beyond their range of vision.

As close as Vera was to the waterfall, even she did not see the heavy figure which lowered itself into the lake directly by the waterfall—quietly, stealthily.

The noisy bird in the thickets surrounding the lake kept on cawing, making an infernal racket. Enough to wake the dead, but not enough to alert the living.

The tired old boards of the wooden dock platform creaked beneath Vera Sanchez's feet. Rolling her pant legs up to her knees, she sat on the dock's edge and dangled her long legs into the water. Her toes broke the surface and the sensation was cooling. Delighted, she swooshed her fine legs back and forth. It was so peaceful and still out here, all by herself. Useless to worry about things in a spot like this...

Vera did not see or hear the air bubbles breaking the surface of the lake not very far from where she was sitting. All she did hear was the country symphony of night noises so typical of the Crystal Lake environs—crickets scratching in the underbrush, branches and leaves fluttering and rustling. the evening breeze whispering along the lake, the water lapping at the shoreline. It was all so idyllic. A real haven from all of life's headaches. A retreat, you could call it.

She leaned back now, putting her arms behind her head, lying flat, staring up at the dark sky, leaving her feet in the cooling lake. She kept paddling them back and forth, enjoying the sensation.

She was unaware of the darkened figure easing gently, silently, toward her under the surface of the waters like a deadly shark

She breathed in, arching her bust. Sensuous serenity overtook her. She was a lovely girl and she was Latin. Softly, gently, a Spanish song from her childhood filtered from her lips, all about love and loss. The swimming figure below the surface of the lake reached the two legs and feet dangling in the water.

Now Vera's song was coming to an end....

Suddenly, the Arcadian paradise turned into a nightmare.

Something, someone, abruptly seized her dangling legs and feet and tugged down hard. Vera, jolted into reality, screamed, feeling herself pulled forward. But she was plucky and strong. She hung on, clinging for her very life to the side of the dock. And now, fingers and hands were on her calves. She felt her grasp on the dock slipping—she kicked out.

And in a moment, she was released. The clutching, seizing hands let go—she pulled herself back on the dock, breathing wildly, her eyes trying to find her unknown assailant. Her heart thumped.

Rising out of the shadowy waters, clad in a black Scuba suit and white faceless mask, was none other than Shelly, the practical joker. One pudgy hand was curled around a spear-gun. When Shelly tugged the mask off and Vera saw his familiar face, the glare she gave him could have killed. She was also shocked speechless for a moment by the colossal stupidity of his jest.

"You've just learned a valuable lesson," he mocked her with solid scorn. "A beautiful girl like you should never go out in the dark alone."

She found her voice, her gorge rising with it.

"Damn you, Shelly!"

She came at him, fists balled. He blanched, retreating.

"Why do you do these *stupid* things?"

"I have to," he answered lamely.

"You don't *have to!* Nobody does."

"I just want you to like me."

"I do like you. But not when you act like a jerk!"

"Being a jerk is better than being nothing."

His hurt tone softened her. She sighed, feeling futile.

"I never said you were nothing."

"You don't have to say it," he challenged her. "I can tell."

Her eyes showed pity for him. "You're wrong."

He hung his head, unable to say anything more. He couldn't face her, either. He turned and trudged off towards the house. Vera Sanchez felt her maternal instincts rise. And her native *simpatico* always did her in. "Hey... I'll be in in a little while. We can talk some more."

She couldn't tell whether he had heard her or not.

When he reached the house, Shelly plumped down on the porch swing, defeated again. He was still clutching the mask and spear-gun. His mood was contemplative and self-pitying. He began slowly to rock back and forth. The taut metal chains that supported the swing vibrated and creaked in a steady, mechanical rhythm.

Shelly stared down at the lake revealed in the moonlight.

As for Vera, she was sitting on the dock's edge again, her back to him.

He had to wonder, as he had since he first saw her, what it would be like to make love to a girl like Vera Sanchez. He was somehow certain he would never know.

It was then that he heard the animal-like cry emanating from the old barn, as if some creature were wounded or hurt. He roused himself. Coming to his feet, he thought he saw a large, shadowy figure cross in front of one of the windows. The cry sounded again.

Alarmed, he ran down the porch steps and headed for the barn on a dead run. His mask and spear-gun dangled at his side.

As soon as he got to the barn, he peered through the window anxiously. It was too dark to see anything. He rapped on the window.

"Chuck? Chili? What're you guys doing in there?"

Rumbling noises issued from within but there was nothing that sounded like an answer. He moved quickly to the barn doors and pried them open. Inside, he fumbled for the light switch in the dark.

"You guys doin' somethin' I shouldn't see?"

Jocularity did not help. He was worried, realizing he hadn't seen Chili and Chuck around. He found the switch and flicked a finger. Upon the flooding of the interior with light, an owl flew toward him, zooming down from the upper loft, Shelly dropped the mask and his spear-gun, throwing up both hands to protect his face. The owl shot by him in a flash, whipping through the partially open barn doors. Shelly closed them quickly so the bird couldn't get back in. Then he took a deep breath, his eyes shooting around the interior of the big old barn.

Now there were no more rumbling noises or sounds of any kind.

Slowly, watchfully, Shelly stalked the barn. This time he held the spear-gun in both hands, ready for anything that might happen. More owls or—whatever.

***

Vera was pacing on the dock, trying to think. She stopped at the furthest edge, peering down into the water. A white object was floating by. With a chuckle, she saw it was a woman's bra. Debbie's probably, considering what she and Andy had been doing in the lake earlier that day. Vera smirked, lay prone on the floorboards of the dock and grabbed the undergarment before it could sail by.

Leaning back on the dock again, she wrung out the soaked bra. As she did so, the wallet in the rear pocket of her jeans was nudged out of place by the heel of her boot beneath her buttocks. She picked it up. It was Shelly's wallet, the one he had handed her at the liquor store.

For a second, she hesitated. Then with a little smile, she leafed through its contents. She found his driver's license and a photograph of Shelly with a woman who had to be his mother. Then she heard a noise. She turned, embarrassed, Shelly was nowhere in sight. Nor was anyone else, for that matter. She straightened up and once again, the wallet gave her trouble. Her hand knocked against a dock post and the wallet fell out of her grasp, bouncing off the platform into the

waters of the lake. She saw it sink out of sight and her spirits went with it.

"That's just great!" she said aloud to no one in particular.

Sighing, she took off her shoes and plunged into the water, diving after the billfold. Hell, she owed that much to Shelly.

She paddled around in the shallows, searching with her hands. Then she cut underwater, holding her breath, and looked further down. The water was dark and murky. She had to rise periodically to store up oxygen again. Now she submerged deeper than on her previous attempts. She had no idea how deep the water was here. But she had to go further out, too. The billfold was light and could have dropped further out as it sank. Air bubbles marked her progress. She wound up a good distance from shore, and she always came up empty-handed.

She couldn't find the damn thing. What lousy luck!

On the dock, now as she looked back, she spied a dark figure. She could see the white mask and the spear-gun held aloft. She waved to the figure, shouting at the top of her voice, "Hey—I dropped your wallet! I'm sorry...." She began to swim back for the shore, giving up the hunt. The figure nodded, waiting. Poor Shelly—always a loser, she thought.

Using a smooth breast stoke, Vera reached the dock in no time at all. And lo and behold, barely two yards from the platform, she spotted the leather wallet, floating on the surface. She grabbed at it eagerly, happy at heart, treading water. Then she held it triumphantly above her head for Shelly to see. "*I found it!*"

Vera reached the dock edge and looked up from the water, only to find the spear-gun leveled right at her head. She was literally looking up its barrel. The masked face above the gun was now something out of Nightmare Alley.

"What're you doing...?" she began to murmur, shocked. And then utter panic took over all of her senses and reflexes. "Who are you?"

This couldn't be Shelly. Shelly wouldn't point his spear-gun at her.

She never heard the trigger depress, or heard the click of the powerful air propulsion.

The world exploded and kaleidoscoped with one roaring rush of violence. The barbed arrow, the deadly spear, penetrated swiftly into Vera's skull, all in one lighting-like split second.

But even as her dying body sank beneath the waters of Crystal Lake, there was an expression of disbelief etched on her lovely face, frozen for all time and all eternity.

Blood slowly seeped to the surface of the water. Red bubbles came up, too, tiny circles of death.

The monster known as Jason stared down for a long time at the place where she had submerged. His ragged breathing sounded more hoarsely than ever. It was so easy to kill once you got into the habit....

This had been perhaps the easiest kill of all.

But, like all the other victims, this one too had come to him, swimming to her own demise.

Jason turned from the dock's edge and stared back toward the house. The light in the second floor bedroom window drew his fevered gaze. There was a lambent glow from that window, as though from candlelight and not electricity. Andy and Debbie's room.

Huge, hulking Jason marched back to the house, the speargun hanging from his right hand like an executioner's axe.

The night was still young and there was more work to be done.

There were still seven alive in Higgins House.

The black ones did not count. They had been strangers.

Vera Sanchez had been the first to die of those who had come to the cottage for the weekend, the first out of eight young people.

Jason strode as swiftly and as silently as death, toward the big old house half-hidden by the surrounding oak trees.

Only the full moon saw him.

BLOOD BATH

The room was darkened save for pools of light emanating from several candles, one in each window, the others on the opposite side of the room, lending an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy. The hammock was wildly rocking back and forth, accompanied by those sounds peculiar to lovemaking the whole wide world over.

And Andy and Debbie were making love.

Fleeting glimpses of their naked limbs and torsos could be seen intermittently above the curved sides of the swinging hammock. Blankets and sheets hung over the edges of the hammock to the floor. The sounds grew more heated, the mutual thrashing more impassioned, until that climactic moment when all movement stilled, all sounds diminished. The hammock gently, quietly swayed to an easier pace, until it practically did not move at all.

Debbie's happy sigh broke the silence.

"That was the best yet. Was it me, you, or the hammock?"

"I vote for me." Andy said.

"I vote for the hammock."

She tried to rise from the love-bed, her breasts damp and gleaming. It was not a simple operation. She nearly fell to the floor, taking Andy with her. He yelped in mock fear.

"I'm seasick," he laughed. "Get in or get out of the boat."

She got out carefully, lightly. She headed for the bathroom, a naked nymph. She flicked on the light switch. It was bright and nearly blinding after the soft candles. She turned on the shower, adjusting it to a fine, steady spray. Andy called out loudly from the hammock, "What are you doing?"

She poked her head out of the bathroom, smiling. "I think it's called a shower. You might try it some time."

"You're too clean for me."

She responded to that by closing the door.

She never felt better in her life. The steaming shower water just made things even better. For all his talk, Andy was a great lover. But

the dope was still trying to carry on a conversation while the water was going full blast.

"Hey, Deb... can you hear me?"

"Barely."

"I'm going downstairs to get a beer. You want one?"

"What?" Soap had gotten into her ears. Behind the sheer shower curtain, Debbie's naked silhouette was a picture for a calendar. She was luxuriating in the soap and hot water. Through the plastic curtain, she did not see the bathroom door open. But the door banged and she did hear that. She blinked, her eves fighting against the soap and water. "Andy?" she called out.

When there was no answer, she quickly turned off the hissing water and wiped the soap from her eyes. Now she saw the shadowy figure poised behind the shower curtain in front of her. Reaching out quickly, she pulled the curtain to one side....

To find Andy, completely dressed, upside down, walking on his hands again. Her heart and mind cried out in relief. The dumb lovable sap! He had scared her almost to death!

"Do you want a beer?" Andy's face asked from nearly floor-level.

Looking down at him, she sighed. "Sure."

"I'll be back in a minute."

With that, he turned himself around expertly and hand-walked out of the bathroom. Debbie jumped out of the tub and shut the door again. She returned to her shower and turned the water back on.

Men! What small boys they were sometimes, for all their big cocks.

She laughed happily, remembering the hammock session. The shower water hissed, sizzled and sang.

Debbie could not know that Jason was coming up the spiral staircase to the second level of the cottage on gliding, silent feet.

Mad, monstrous Jason now held a thick-bladed machete in his huge right hand. The machete was fully a foot long. Jason, whose blood-lust had not been quenched, and might never be.

***

Andy, walking upside-down with all his athletic, well-conditioned prowess, was whistling an off-key tune. But he was happy, too. It was great to be young and in love and Debbie was a swell chick.

He did not see Jason's hulking figure braced against the wall in the hallway corridor close to the entrance of the bedroom. Andy hand-walked right by him, only inches from his booted feet. His own whistling drowned out the coarse, ragged breathing of the massive maniac. Suddenly, Debbie's voice sang out from the bathroom again. "Andy, are you still there?"

Andy had reached the head of the stairs.

He turned around deftly, still upright on his hands, pivoting at a one hundred eighty degree angle. It was then that he saw Jason's boots. Surprised, he looked up. Jason was wearing Shelly's awesome white mask, and the machete was poised above his head, high and deadly.

Before Andy could react, the glistening blade came down in a savage, powerful arc. The blade sliced through Andy's upside-down body, literally halving him where he stood. The ghastly scream that bolted from the young man's throat seemed to reverberate throughout the house as his mutilated remains toppled down the spiral staircase, bouncing and bumping all the way.

Jason retrieved the body. He moved like a silent wraith for so large a man. He dragged Andy's halved corpse up the stairs. There was no indecision in the monster at all. He carried the corpse back into the bedroom, while Debbie was still showering.

With the water going full blast and the bathroom door closed, Debbie saw and heard nothing. She was rinsing her hair now. When she finally shut off the faucets, she felt like a million dollars.

Suddenly the silence from the bedroom struck her.

"Andy—are you there? You can have my beer. I don't want it."

Humming, she wrapped herself in a terrycloth robe and swung the bathroom door open, to find the room quiet and untouched. Andy was nowhere in sight. Debbie shrugged and walked to the bed room door. Opening it, she called down the stairs: "Andy, don't bring me a beer. Do you hear me?"

She stood at the door for a moment, listening.

Behind her, a huge shadow flitted silently across the room.

"Andy! Answer me! I hate when you do that..."

She slammed the bedroom door shut angrily. Peeved at the absent Andy, she picked up the paperback novel lying on the end table by the bed. *The Beast With The Red Hands*, a shocker by Sidney Stuart. An old title but a goodie. She swung into the love hammock once more and made herself comfortable. She didn't bother covering herself The covers and blankets drooped to the floor. She settled in. The hammock swayed gently with her weight. She found her place in the book where the hero was undergoing his Jekyll and Hyde transformation and began to read. Her right hand indolently played with her damp brown hair.

Quite unexpectedly, from above her, a large drop of something fell, splattering all over the white pages of the book. Something red—*blood?* Alarmed, she touched the fluid with her fingertips, trying to think straight. "Blood...?" she asked herself.

Reflexively, her gaze swung upward to the ceiling.

The scream that started in her throat would not come out.

Her eyes could not blink.

Wrapped around the wooden rafters above her, was a mangled, bloodied, awful thing. It couldn't be—it was... *Andy!*

Her mind rioted, her nerve-ends jangled. She tried to get up.

From beneath the arch of the hammock, hidden by the draping covers and blankets, a huge hand reached upward, buried itself in her damp brown hair and snapped her head back violently, pinning her helplessly to the pillow. Now the scream started to come, welling in her throat, bursting for expression.

The carving knife that plunged into the back of her neck and savaged on through her flesh, the point emerging from the front of her throat, was murderously effective. Splashing blood spurted all over Debbie's horrified face. Her eyes were incredulous.

The curious, ragged, intense breathing filled the silence of the room. The bloody carving knife dripped.

Three down. Vera Sanchez, Andy and Debbie.

Five more to go. Chuck, Chili, Shelly, Derek and—Chris.

Jason's awful shadow stalked across the floor of the bedroom.

The candles burning low made the room a scene from Hell.

***

With the moon for company and the darkened landscape yielding to the beam of the flashlight, Chris and Derek were still making their way back to the cottage. The road was rutted and twisting and treacherous. Derek found that out the hard way. An unseen pothole brought him down, twisting his ankle and making him fall forward, the flashlight dropping from his hand. Amazingly, he landed in the arms of a dark figure standing just before them. Derek gasped in surprise as the man clutched him. Strangers on a dark night are never exactly comforting.

But Chris, quick to act, retrieved the flashlight and turned it on the newcomer's face and relaxed It was the ancient hitchhiker of the morning, the raggedy, gaunt old bum who called himself Abel.

"What are you doing out here?" she demanded angrily.

Derek regained his feet, his ankle tender but unbroken.

"You know this guy?"

"Sort of," Chris admitted. "We ran into him to day coming here in the van. He's kind of—well, unusual."

Abel's whiskered face and burning eyes reacted to the glare of the flashlight. "I'm one of the Flock as are you, my brother and sister."

Derek made a face. "Yeah—sure—come on, Chris. I think we should be going."

But the tall, ragged Abel blocked their path, raising his long arms as if in benediction. "I can't let you go," he declared.

"Look, old man," Derek said, quietly. "We don't want any trouble. Stand aside."

"Then turn around, Brother, and walk away from trouble."

Derek started to fume, thought better of it and took Chris's arm. "Chris—let's go." He hobbled past the tall, gaunt Abel. Chris followed him without looking back. Abel, arms still raised and eyes burning with some inner conviction, solemnly in toned in a rising, cultured voice, "*Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil....*"

That made Chris look back, in spite of herself. She restrained a shudder. There was something about the old man that was not laughable at all. He sounded so damn sure of himself....

"Forget him," Derek laughed. "The world is full of nuts like him. A loser, that's what he is. And we're not going to join him. Get me, Chris?"

"Got you, Derek." She smiled and felt a lot better.

But, still—the old man sure put on a good act, didn't he? Right out of the Bible, too.

Derek and Chris fumbled their way back to the cottage, the flashlight guiding them all the way with some help from that gorgeous moon overhead, and a skyful of stars.

***

In the kitchen of the house, Chuck was busy at the old stove, shaking a pot of popcorn over a low burner. The corn kernels, spurred by the flame, were crackling and popping merrily. Chuck amused himself by trying to catch some of them with his mouth as they shot upwards. He put back the lid and probed at his right ear with a scratching thumb. Chili came through the back door with a flashlight in her hand. Her sexy eyes were puzzled. Chuck looked at her blankly.

"I can't find the bong anywhere," Chili complained. "Can't you remember where you dropped it, Butterfingers?"

"I can't even remember what *day* it is, man."

Chili suddenly started. "Hey, did I hear you screaming?"

"You probably heard Debbie having an orgasm." He giggled. "How come you don't scream when we have sex?"

"Give me something to scream about," she chided.

Now, abruptly, all the lights went out at once. Complete and total darkness closed over the kitchen and the house save for the blue glow of the flame on the lit burner. Chili let out a low scream.

"What's the matter?" Chuck's sleepy eyes now opened.

"Nothin'. I was just practicing."

"Don't *do* that to me," Chuck commanded. "You'll wake me up."

Chili flicked on the flashlight and handed it to him.

"Go down into the cellar and check the fusebox."

"In the dark? Alone?"

"Be a man, man!" She sighed at his lack of drive. Chuck spread his hands, taking a Coleman lantern down from the window sill. Reluctantly, he handed it to Chili. Then he took the flash and himself out of the kitchen door. He passed the kitchen window on his way to the cellar. Chili ignited the lantern and a yellow glow illuminated the kitchen. She carried the lamp to the stove, setting it down there. Barefoot Chuck was such a goon sometimes, for all the fun he was. Man, if it wasn't for her own craziness, they would have split up long ago.... Sighing again, Chili tried to keep the chill out of her bones. She didn't like it when lights went out for no good reason.

Sloshing through a line of water puddles on the cellar floor, looking for the fusebox, Chuck was talking to himself in the dark to allay his anxieties. Flashlight or not, man, it was *dark* down here! Dark and cold. He missed the bong like crazy.

"There's nothin' to be scared of, man," he said aloud to the dark and himself. "So what if it's dark? What would happen? Nothin' to be scared of down here, is there?"

The noise his feet made swishing in the puddles unnerved him. He looked harder for the fusebox, stabbing the flash beam outward. There was no other sound in the darkened cellar, except maybe his heartbeats.

***

Chili took over the popcorn routine while he was gone. She made it a leisurely chore. And then something heavy knocked on the kitchen door. She turned and picked up the Coleman lantern.

"Chuck? You back already?"

He didn't answer. Frowning, she hesitated. Then she shrugged again and pulled the door open. The evening breeze came in, cooling.

Shelly stood there, swaying, gurgling,coughing.

Shelly with his fat face streaming blood, his skull split open, his chest a soaking red ruin. He came lurching at her, falling, slumping

to the floor. Chili shook her head, grudgingly admiring.

"Nice make-up job," she concluded.

She stepped past him and over him and closed the kitchen door. He did not get up. The rattling, weird noises continued to emanate from his throat. Chili, wary of all his ruses, snapped, "Stop foolin' around, man. We got problems enough."

She went back to the stove and the popcorn. The kernels were jumping.

Shelly did not get up.

He could not. He never would.

***

Down in the basement, Chuck had found the open fusebox. All the fuses and electrical wiring now lay exposed to his flashlight beam. The main switch was in the OFF position. Chuck grunted and lifted the switch to ON. The one lone basement bulb glimmered into life. "That's better." Chuck said, pleased with his efforts.

Turning, his sleepy eyes tried to make sense out of what he now saw. Standing, silhouetted, backlit by the lone bulb was the huge shadow of a man, like a monster out of some cartoon picture—

Startled, scared, disbelieving, Chuck tried to say something. But there was no time. No time at all.

Powerful, hurting, deadly hands, accompanied by a forward rush of great weight and force, seized him, took his stupefied face and held him aloft, his bare feet off the ground as if he was a child. He felt himself sailing backwards, flying—hurtling toward the open fusebox.

He hit it solidly and his feet coming down made contact with the pools of water on the cellar's cold floor. His hands flung up in protection, touched the exposed electrical wires in the fuse box. The electricity, like a laser beam in a science-fiction movie, hummed, shot and crackled throughout his body. It was electrocution pure and simple. The stench of burning, sizzling flesh now filled the cellar.

The lights began to blink furiously. On and off. On and off. On and off.

Jason laughed viciously.

***

At the stove, Chili found the blinking lights and Shelly's playacting—he had not gotten up yet—a further annoyance. "What's goin' on?" she mumbled to herself, checking the popcorn. She took the lantern again to go to the cellar herself. What was taking Chuck so long?

But Shelly's body was braced against the door, motionless. Still. The dead eyes staring, wide-open.

Chili's own eyes hardened. "Get up, Shelly. Enough is enough."

He could not hear her.

"Okay. Have it your own way," she snapped, icily angry now.

The lights were still acting up, blinking on and off. Chili bent down to push the pudgy Shelly out of the way. She touched his lifeless flesh in the process. Something sticky wetted her hands.

She knew the feel of that stuff, the look of it.

Blood. Real blood—maybe.

"Oh my God...." She quickly pressed her ear against the bloodied chest. There was no heartbeat. There was no pulse. And Shelly was as still and unmoving as a block of ice.

"No, please..." she begged, her mind beginning to boggle, "Get up," she begged the inert form "Get up—stop this foolin' around..... "She pressed her fingers with all her might against his heart. He did not move nor did his eyes close.

Chili struggled erect, her brain spinning.

Trembling, shaking, screaming now, the blood rushing to her head, she burst from the kitchen, heading for the spiral staircase like a woman gone mad. She was not far from that, either.

"*Andy! Debbie! Shelly's dead—he's dead!*"

She raced up the stairs, heart strangling, going toward the bedroom of Andy and Debbie. The house lights were continuing their mad tango of inconsistency. Chili had never been so horrified in her life.

But she was in for a lot more. Much more.

She found the mutilated corpses of Andy and Debbie.

She began to scream endlessly, holding her hands to her ears, as if she did not want to hear herself going crazy.

When she staggered to the railing of the balcony, she was a dazed, half-human girl, her eyes wild and unreasoning. "*Oh, God—help—*"

She half-fell rather than walked back down the spiral staircase. She had lost all sense of time and place. Horror had claimed her.

Which was merciful, in a small way.

When Jason's cruel hand came up out of the darkness—she literally walked into him—the redhot poker in his fingers, one from the fire blazing in the living room hearth, stabbed directly through her blouse, finding her breast and her heart in one fiery onslaught.

The blouse caught flame, the flesh burned and fried.

Jason's maniac laughter echoed in the corridor.

Three more down.

Two more to go.

Higgins Haven had become Hades. A maniac's playground and a charnel house, all in one hideous night.

THE MONSTER IS LOOSE

Rushing winds and eerie night sounds had encompassed the cottage as Derek and Chris made their way back. The brilliant full moon had now been overtaken by dark and somber clouds. The entire landscape was one of abandonment and isolation, as if no living soul was present at Crystal Lake. A windstorm seemed to be brewing also, making the entire vicinity and its environs one of forlorn desolation. Not a light was showing from the old house. Not so much as a candle glow.

As they walked up the winding dirt road past the lake, Chris was holding Derek tightly around the waist. She needed the comfort of his presence. A chill had stolen over her, aided and abetted by the encounter with weird old Abel. The ancient bum was not exactly a heartwarming individual. He had given her the galloping creeps. Added to her bad memories of the cottage, her mood was very low. The howling wind, building up in fury, worsened that.

There was no sign of life from the house as they drew closer. None at all. That somehow did not seem right.

"It's awfully quiet around here." Chris offered. "Hard to believe the Wild Bunch is already asleep."

"Knowing them." Derek added, cynically, "who knows what's waiting for us inside."

They reached the kitchen door. Derek trained the flashlight on the knob. Chris, leading him, turned the handle and pushed the door inward. The barrier opened a crack, then came to an abrupt stop. Something heavy seemed to be pressing against the other side. Chris frowned.

"There's something behind the door. I can't open it." Then she sniffed the air, her nose wrinkling. "I smell something burning."

Derek grunted. "Let Mr. Macho do it."

Leading with his shoulder, he rammed against the stubborn door. Forcing it ajar even more, he slipped inside. Chris followed.

The kitchen was as dark as a tomb.

Derek slid a hand along the wall, searching for the light switch.

"Something *is* burning, Chris. Look at the stove."

She aimed the flashlight at the stove. A pot was cooking there, charring over a lit burner. Derek found the switch, but nothing happened. "The light's not working. What the...."

Chris turned off the gas burner, grabbed a towel and lifted the too-hot lid. The flash revealed burning, blackened popcorn.

"Real smart," she growled. "What a bunch of yo-yos!"

Derek had bumped into the butcher block table in the dark as he went around it to close the door. The table was situated on a woven circular rug which was wedged underneath the door frame.

"Look at this," he advised Chris.

She shone the light in his direction.

Derek dislodged the rug.

"Somebody shoved this against the door. That's why we couldn't open the damned thing."

"What's going on here, Derek?" It was all so confusing.

"You tell *me*. They're your friends." He crossed over to the living room. "I'm gonna check the big room."

He passed through the swinging door that separated kitchen and living room. Chris lay the flash light down on the butcher block table. With the towel, she carried the smoking, charred pot to the sink. She ran the faucet and the pot sizzled as the liquid hit its overheated surfaces. She tried not be frightened or upset, but it was not easy. With the howling wind, the darkness, the electricity out and no sign of Chuck, Chili, Debbie, Andy, Vera and Shelly, she was very disturbed. It wasn't right that things should be so quiet.

Derek being in the living room and not with her was also a bit unsettling. She did not want to be alone, not even for a second.

Derek, using the glowing fireplace as a guide, looked around the big room. The flickering orange glow from the low-burning fire aided him as he traversed the room, trying each light switch to no avail—the juice seemed to dead. Derek began to feel uneasy, too.

"Andy?" he sang out. "Debbie? Vera... Shelly... where is everybody? Chuck? Chili? Come on, you guys...."

There was no answer and no light.

Except for a dimly-lit kerosene lamp tipped over in one corner of the room, everything else appeared virtually untouched, innocent of any kind of previous intrusion. Derek set the lantern upright and returned to the kitchen. A log in the fireplace crackled and spit as it yielded to the flames.

"No dice," he said, sticking his head into the kitchen.

"Huh?" Chris almost jumped when he bobbed back in.

"It appears that everyone else has taken off and left us."

"They wouldn't do that." She was scraping the burned pot in the sink. Derek wagged his handsome head.

"Well—I don't know what they're up to, but the electricity is out in the house. I'm goin' to the barn to check the main circuits. You stay here." He swung the door shut and Chris dropped the charred pot.

"Derek... wait for me... I want to go with you!"

She retrieved the flashlight and rushed after him, catching up with him in the living room. He grinned and took her hand, squeezing it for comfort. But then he was gone, just like that. She lost sight of him when she dropped the flashlight. When she straightened up, he was nowhere to be seen. The furniture seemed to mock her.

"Derek?"

She heard a slam of sound and trained the flash light in that direction. The front door to the house was standing open, victim of the budding storm. She hurried toward the swinging barrier, but hesitated before going through it. Her heart was somewhere in her mouth.

"Derek... is everything all right...?" Standing framed in the doorway of the house, she could not see to her left.

There, just off the porch, Derek was wrapped in the bulky, cruel arms of a shadowy giant. One mammoth hand covered Derek's mouth, preventing any outcry. Derek's arms clawed straight outward, pleading for help. But the arms of Jason were merciless. His mad eyes shone like fiery coals in the gloom of the porch. The silent struggle continued. Derek's eyes were popping out of his head.

Chris, deciding not to go outside in the dark night, went back inside, closing the door against the wind.

Derek's last remaining hope for survival was gone.

Jason proceeded to crush his skull with his bare hands. Derek's eyes bugged out of their sockets.

His feet tattooed helplessly against the porch floorboards.

But only Jason heard that. Jason and the night. Chris was back in the house. Alone, with the rest of the dead.

***

Back in the darkened cottage once more, Chris was about to reenter the kitchen when the sound of water dripping in a steady, rhythmic cadence made her stop dead in her tracks. She shone the flash light upwards in the direction of the noise.

She gawked foolishly, her brain trying to gather the loose ends of all that was happening now, so very quickly.

The balcony above her was rimmed with water. A continuing flow of droplets was cascading down, splashing on the living room floor. Disturbed anew, she moved to the base of the spiral staircase. The shadows of the interior made flickering phantoms in the gloom.

"I don't know what kind of game you guys are playing," she called up the winding staircase, "but I don't like it!"

She climbed quickly, the flashlight beam preceding her, a moving, stabbing beacon of light. The glare picked up the path of the flowing water. It was like a stream, really, stopping at the bottom of the closed bedroom door. Chris had no way of knowing that the liquid path went as far as the bathroom door. The water seeped, seeped. Chris sloshed through the puddles. "Hey, guys, enough is enough. You're wrecking the house. And that isn't fair...."

Andy and Debbie's bedroom was worse. She tracked in, disgustedly, anger replacing the uneasiness she had experienced earlier. She almost broke through the bathroom door toward the tub and the shower curtain. The running water was a Niagara of noise now, closer to its source. Chris aimed the flashlight, tearing the curtain to one side. The light beam illuminated the overflowing tub.

Various clothes floated on the surface. There were very curious stains on the material. Red like—blood....

Chris lifted the wet clothing from the basin.

It was then that she realized the red *was* blood, that the garments were blood-stained.

"What is going on here?" her shocked voice questioned the four walls. And then she ran almost blindly out of the bathroom, out of the bedroom, flying down the spiral staircase, her shoes barely touching the steps. Her brain refused to think, to add all the twos and twos the last few terrible minutes had presented to her.

She hurtled for the front door and the safety of outside.

She whipped the door open. Behind her, the water still gurgled in its steady running, cascading from the over-filled balcony.

Leaving the door hanging wide open, she plunged into the night and the darkness, running for the red barn standing off to the right, almost racing the wind. The blowing wind tossed her blonde hair wildly.

"DEREK!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Stumbling on the dark path, she grabbed at over hanging oaken branches to keep herself from falling. The wind whistled through the trees in a wailing symphony of fear. And something swung down, hitting her full in the face, knocking her backwards for a moment. A dangling, rotating, wrapped-up *thing*, descending from the gnarled old oak tree like a hanging side of beef. Only it wasn't anything that simple, that normal.

Chris stared upward, her eyes starting from her head.

It was Chili, bloodied and wrapped in a smeared white sheet, harnessed under her dead arms by the dangling rope which swung her.

Horrified, struck dumb with terror, Chris ran screaming back to the house. Dashing headlong, almost sightlessly, her brain and heart and soul pounding like dynamos gone wild. *Chili... dead...*

She shot up the porch, through the front door, and slammed it shut behind her as if her salvation depended on just that. It did. She backed away from the closed door, seeing through it, seeing Chili swinging from the end of that rope. "Oh, God... Chili... *no!* Derek... help! Where are you...?"

A sudden gust of wind blew the front door open again, smashing it against the inner wall. Chris jumped. Pure instinct guided her. She

bolted the door madly, seized the nearest chair and barricaded the portal by forcing the chair under the doorknob. Breathlessly, she moved to the windows. She slammed the first one shut, then the second, then a third, locking each one as she did so. Her fingers were like frozen ice cubes. At the third window, one more horror awaited her. She very nearly went out of her mind right then and there. The wind behind her blew open another window with a sudden burst of crashing sound. She whirled like a top at the noise. Her nerves and reflexes and every atom of her being were geared to the slightest change in the nature of the room—the cottage....

Derek came flying through the window, but not under his own power. No.

Through the shattering glass, the splintering shards, his bloody corpse came, released like a juggernaut. It landed against her, knocking her over in a sprawl of arms and legs. His body was still warm.

Together they hit the floor.

In a mad frenzy, Chris tried to push his lifeless form away. "*This can't be happening... no!...*" Her voice was a broken, stammering moan. "*It can't be... can't be!*"

But it was. The terror, the horror, the madness only mounted, multiplied, enlarged in a new paroxysm of fantasy and hideous reality. Glass crashed again. Another window was breaking!

Her dazed eyes saw the massive, ugly monster squeezing his immense frame through another broken window. It was Jason, urging his great form through the opening. His face was in the shadows but his hand was in the light. The axe held there caught the fireplace's dying gleam. Chris backed off, her mouth working, her head shaking.

This was real. This was the monster.

"*Oh, God... no...!*"

Fear moved her. Paralyzing terror did not stop her limbs. She scrambled away from Derek's lifelessness and sprang for the spiral staircase. She gained the top of the stairs and the balcony in one incredible explosion of speed. Hysteria lent her wings.

One look down the staircase and the hysteria turned to blood-chilling madness. Her sanity began to crumble—melt—dissolve.

Jason was at the base of the stairs. Jason, wearing the white mask.

He was brandishing the axe, gleaming as it caught the firelight.

He began to ascend slowly, deliberately, as if he had all the time in the universe to kill one defenseless female. The last one left alive in this charnel house of the dead. The mask was a sliteyed cipher.

One left to go.

The girl responsible for it all....

Jason came up the stairs, axe at the ready.

His eyes were twin coals of burning insanity shining through slits.

And purpose, deadly purpose marked his blazing stare.

Chris saw the bookcase resting against the balcony wall. It was huge, loaded with hard-covered tomes. She did not stop to think, or ask herself if she had the strength. She did it. The adrenalin of fear drove her to superhuman endeavor. She had to use all her power and all her fear to shove the heavy bookcase forward, out from the wall, away from its position, sliding and shoving it to the head of the spiral staircase. Jason kept on coming one step at a time, a masked monster.

With a mighty shove and a gasp of torment, Chris sent the bookcase over the balcony, books and all, toppling it directly into the path of the giant looming below her, so close she could have seen the mad color of his eyes, had she wanted to look, mask or no mask.

The bookcase fell heavily against the massive body of the man coming up the stairs. There was a grunt, a crash, and both man and bookcase went crashing down the staircase.

A sob erupted from Chris's throat.

Turning blindly, not waiting to see, she reeled down the hallway of the second level. The gloomy corridor was a maze in which her building terror and near-insanity roamed desperately.

There was no more sound from the base of the staircase below.

Chris, her ears ringing with the furious thumping of her own heart, raced down the hallway looking for salvation—and escape.

But there seemed no place to hide, nowhere to run from the terror and horror that was down below.

The monster was still loose in the house, and she was alone with Death.

Death who wore a white mask.

THE GIRL AND THE GHOUL

Cunning now replaced desperation.

The will to live, the good fight for self-preservation guided Chris like a helping hand from some divine power. She could not wait to learn if the bookcase attack had been successful. There was no more time for guesswork, no room, no margin for error. Any mistake this time could well be her last. And death would be the end of everything.

She nearly slipped on the running water streaming from the bathroom. That was when she thought of a diversionary tactic. She didn't wait to ponder the wisdom of the move. She slammed the bathroom door and the bedroom door as loudly as she could and then rapidly disappeared into the closet at the end of the dark hall. She locked herself in, breathing hard. Her heart was a painful lump in her chest, it was beating so violently.

She huddled in the narrow, cramped darkness, squeezed between all kinds of hanging clothes and paraphernalia. She waited, listening, hardly daring to breathe, straining to catch some indication that the monster, the ghoul, was prowling about, looking for her. Unless the bookcase—a faint glimmer of hope burned in her breast.

She heard nothing.

The hallway was alarmingly quiet. Dead quiet.

She covered her mouth to stifle the sound of her panicky breathing. Tears, unbidden, came down her flushed and fiery cheeks. Her head was filled with all sorts of terrible pictures. Chili—Derek—their bloody bodies—the others—*where were they?*

She slowly leaned forward and peered out the keyhole.

The corridor was so dark. So silent. So empty.

She pressed her eye closer, gasping for breath. Suddenly, there came a noise directly above her. It was a night of noises and terror and more insanity....

Debbie's mutilated corpse was falling on top of her from the shelf of the closet. She screamed. She couldn't stop the scream. She was out of control now. But even as she winced and her heart lurched at

the sight of Debbie's dead face, she clapped a hand over her own mouth in sheer reflex. Too late—underneath the weight of her dead friend's body, she trembled with terror. The night was madness. This was all so unthinkable. Yet it was true. *Good God! What did it all mean?*

She pushed forward again, freeing herself of the bloody corpse, and put her eye to the keyhole once more. She could have died on the spot. The nightmare, the monster, the ghoul had returned.

Jason was coming down the hall, weird mask and all, toward her, toward the keyhole.

He was a raging, mad bull, unleashed.

The axe was held aloft, ready to maim and smash and kill.

Chris shrank from the sight, backing up against the closet wall, praying the door would hold, that she wouldn't be discovered, that she wouldn't be butchered, that she wouldn't die.

She held in the screams that wanted to come, to burst from her. She was not going to be her own executioner.

But it was no use—there was no pity, no salvation.

The shining axe began to slice through the wooden closet door. The first slice was like a pistol shot in the stillness, ripping, tearing.

Chris's body stiffened. Her trembling face was almost in line with the axe blade as the monster on the other side of the door drew back the axe and sliced downward and inward again. Wood splinters flew.

The carving knife jutting out of Debbie's dead neck suddenly caught Chris's eye. She flinched but she reached and pulled the bloody knife out. She closed her hand around the shaft, her own eyes not quite sane.

In a frenzy, Jason was pounding the axe into the closet door again and again. The splintering holes now permitted an area large enough for him to reach a long arm in and find the inside knob. He did so, getting the door open before Chris could stop him. Triumphantly, a hoarse sound erupting in his throat, he loomed in the entrance-way, the axe coming up once more for the killing downward slice. He took a step inward, his eyes searching the darkness for his last victim, Chris, who reacted instantly to the mammoth threat so close.

She stabbed out wildly with the carving knife.

She punctured his reaching hand, the one with the axe.

The axe dropped to the floor, Jason staggered backward, to escape further injury. Maddened, terrified Chris came at him in a fury, heaving, grunting, lunging at him repeatedly, slicing the air in front of his brutal face.

Now the massive arm retreated.

The girl bravely followed, made stronger by adversity.

Jason stepped backward to avoid both her and the carving knife. The move was ill-timed. The water from the bathroom caused his foot to slide out from under him. Chris saw the opening and took it. She thrust the knife downward and her elation soared as she felt it dig into the giant's thigh striking bone and flesh. Jason howled in agony and tumbled to the wet floor, the knife still imbedded in his thigh. Chris had been unable to hang onto it, but the damage was done.

Score one for terrified young ladies pursued by mad monsters.

Yet the path to freedom was still blocked by the downed brute's body. He was shielding Chris's access to the spiral staircase. For a moment, she panicked. Then she flung herself at Shelly's bedroom close by. It seemed the only way out.

It wasn't.

The door was still closed.

Chris bashed her full weight against the panel but it would not give. Behind her, she heard Jason's fierce grunt. She heard rather than saw him pluck the knife from his wounded thigh. He was hobbling to his feet, favoring that leg. Chris hurled herself at the door once more. She got the door open just in time.

The carving knife, flung by the angered Jason, whizzed by her head and thudded into the wall behind her. She escaped into Shelly's room with death but an inch from her shoulder. The air was electric with danger.

She dashed for the bedroom window, driven by sheer terror. She grabbed a chair as she went, smashing it through the pane in desperation. Quickly, she hoisted herself, ignoring the shards jutting dangerously, squeezing out through the broken window.

Lowering herself out the window, hands clinging to the sill, she looked down at the ground. An unnerving distance for her. She took one last deep breath and relinquished her hold. And prayed.

But Jason had apparently been right on her heels.

Her descent was checked magically, as if a giant hand had stopped her. It had. And he had. Jason's mammoth paw, reaching down through the broken window, arrested her fall, catching the collar of the jacket about her neck. She was dangling now in his powerful grasp, two full floors above the hard earth below. Hanging like Chili —

He began to haul her back up and in with great ease.

She resisted with all the strength she had left, twisting, flailing her arms, screaming. The massive ghoul chuckled, drawing her upward. His masked face was weirdly close and terrible.

Chris ripped open the jacket with both desperate hands and began to wriggle free of the garment. Jason pulled savagely. He almost had her, now—in another second, the prey would be his.

And then she was free of the jacket. Falling, plummeting, plunging all the way to the ground. The monster above her ripped out a fierce oath of disappointment as he fell backwards, her weight released, the empty garment clutched in his brute hands.

She lay on the ground for a long moment, stunned, out of breath, her ankles pounding with agony from the force of the fall.

But she forced herself erect, hobbled past the cellar, hunching low as she snaked her way to the front entrance of the house, the porch.

Half out of her mind now, she looked up into the living room through the opened door. The danger was still with her. The menace had not gone away. Horror was coming again on those awesome feet.

She could see the monster coming down the spiral staircase, past the toppled, smashed bookcase. He was hobblng too, but he was still coming. Coming to kill her.....

She saw no chance to escape now, not with her ankles so bruised and hurting. Shaking, sobbing, with a great deal of pain shooting up her legs, she picked up a heavy log from the stacked pile near the entrance and waited. She leaned against the wall of the house, raising

the log high above her head, lying in wait for Jason. There was no other ploy, no other trick, left to her.

This was it. The last stand. Judgment Day.

The final out. He came hobbling out of the house into the night, searching, his great body a massive menace. A ghoul.

Chris sprang forward with all she had. Her ultimate gesture.

She brought the upraised log down with all her weight behind it, and her fear, and her anger. She caught him directly behind the back of the head.

The thud was like the end of the world.

The blow send him spinning, reeling, dancing off the porch in a senseless sprawl, flipping him down, face-first, on the rocky terrain that fronted the house. He rolled over, briefly, and then was still, as if he had finally died and come to his proper end.

Chris did not wait to see or find out.

She scampered from the porch, bells ringing in her ears, cannons going off in her chest. Bad legs or not, she ran with the howling wind tearing at her face and hair. Her soul soared.

She ran from the porch over to the van, still parked diagonally across from the house, the van that Ali had taken all the gasoline from. A van that would not, could not, go anywhere, least of all to freedom. To safety—and escape from horror.

The wind still howled and tore at her as she ran. But Death yet walked at Crystal Lake in Pinehurst County.

Chris fell into the driver's seat.

She searched her pockets frantically for the car keys. When her fingers closed over them, her heart beat even faster. She turned the key. The motor pulsed and then thundered, shattering the stillness of the dark night. She had to back out to the dirt trail—road. The headlights stabbed the night, sending illumination streaming. The thickets, the ground, the trees came to life looking like objects alive, rather than inanimate things. Chris's nerve ends wanted to let out a scream. But she held onto herself and pointed the red van toward the ram shackle bridge. The van moved, sliding forward. The glowing headlights revealed the roadway—and something else.

Something far more horrible, far more grotesque and evil.

The last thing Chris ever wanted to see again in this world.

The giant in the awful white mask, Jason.

He had staggered, dazed, from the house, out toward the road. As battered as he was, there was enough raw brute strength in him to regain his feet after her solid blow with the log. Chris could not believe her eyes. No man could have survived that blow, much less regained his feet so soon after—her blood froze.

She floored the gas pedal, determined again. She headed the red van straight for the stumbling giant who stood blinking in the glare of the oncoming headlights. It was now or never. *Die, Monster, Die!* Almost crazed with exhilaration and fear, she bulleted the van toward the massive figure. Revenge motivated her, too. Pay this ghoul back for Debbie, Derek and the others....

The red van plowed on, picking up speed. The masked monster saw it coming. He blinked, almost foolishly.

Chris could see the eyes behind the mask registering shock and fright. Grimly she hung on, hands tight on the wheel. The van went on a hard line for the ghoul. Her heart beat faster.

But at the last possible moment, the final second, the huge figure dove out of the vehicle's path, rolling to safety as it raced on by. Chris's disappointment was as nothing compared to what happened

next. The van continued on for another twenty yards and then amazingly, mystifyingly, lurched, sputtered and rolled to a complete dead stop right on the ramshackle wooden bridge over the dried-up stream.

Her blood running cold, she turned the ignition key again and wildly pumped the accelerator. Nothing happened. The van would not start. The motor sounded as dead as a doornail.

"Please, please, *please!*" she begged, pounding the steering wheel in agony of suspense. "Start, dammit!"

The support beams of the ancient bridge were making cracking sounds, unaccustomed to the weight of a vehicle remaining on its old back. Chris glanced fearfully over her shoulder, looking for the giant. Again, she pumped the gas pedal. Again, no answering engine roar.

The rotted wood beneath the wheels of the van began to creak and sag and strain. Chris flung a look at the gas gauge. The needle mocked her. It showed no gasoline... and then she remembered the reserve tank system. Her spirits soared. She reached under the dashboard and flicked the tank switch to RESERVE. She hit the ignition key again, praying half-aloud. This time, the engine roar sounded again. Quickly, she shifted gears. But now, all at once the wood gave way. The bridge shuddered and snapped, collapsing beneath the strain of a parked vehicle. The van suddenly dropped straight down into the bed of rocks not far below, a dead weight.

Chris's forehead slammed up against the steering wheel. She was momentarily dazed and stunned by the abruptness of the bridge mishap. She leaned back in her seat, her hands going for her head. She shook herself. Her head was swimming—she tried to clear her thinking—

But the nightmare pounded on.

The masked monster was upon her once more.

Great fists came crashing through the van window, seizing her around the neck. Her hands shot up, trying to pry them loose. She could not scream. She pounded at the cruel hands with her fists, but with no effect. Jason's merciless fingers vised her throat. He was beginning to squeeze very hard. The rough breathing of Jason

sounded in her ears like the hiss of death. She rallied at that, resourceful as ever.

Her hand found the handle on the van door which rolled up the window. Desperately, she cranked the handle with all she had left.

The window shot up rapidly, capturing Jason's hands in a vice-like grip. He cried out, a muffled oath. But his hands were no longer around Chris's neck. She went out the passenger door as fast as she could, not waiting to look or count the success of her ploy.

Again, she was running. She had never run so much in her life.

She ran along the dried-up stream bed, following its trail toward the old red barn. She felt like she would never draw another free breath. The dark night closed in all around her. The somber skies, hiding the moon, did her a favor. Jason could not see her so easily.

But he had lifted himself from the window trap by butting his head through the glass and freeing his hands. A mighty growl escaped his deep chest. Maddened, he looked for the girl who had thwarted him all night long, the only one who had escaped his killing hands.

The girl he had to kill.

Now.

She hopped the fence surrounding the front of the red barn, looking back over her shoulder for the monster at her heels. He was not far behind. The white-masked figure was lurching after her, roaring, crazed, furious with her obstinacy. Chris struggled against the chilling wind sweeping across the landscape as she pulled at the two large wood slatted doors of the old structure. When she got them open, she hurled herself inside.

She grabbed the first thing she could find—a thick-handled shovel. This she quickly dropped into the slots of the door to secure the barrier against outside entry. The blood roared and pounded in her veins. Would this terrible night ever end?

But the nightmare was a long way from done.

White-masked Jason crashed his big body against the barn doors. The door gave but did not open. The huge fists bashed at the wooden slats, relentlessly, angrily. Chris retreated deeper into the barn. Turning, once again horror slammed her right between the eyes.

The human carnage scattered about the interior of the barn assaulted her head-on. Her tongue stuck in her dry mouth. There were bloody and battered corpses everywhere.

Fox, Loco, Ali and Vera.

It did not matter that she did not know them all. Jason's grisly handiwork spoke for itself. Chris began to cry. The tears came unchecked.

Weeping cost her precious time. Shock gave Jason one more edge.

He had pried the barn doors open enough to force his long arm in to work the shovel which was serving as a lock against his entry. He was working it out of its cradle, making rasping, whining noises.

She shook herself awake, out of shock, and moved desperately.

He had dropped the makeshift bolt out of its grooves. The wild, blowing wind aided him. The doors flew open. Dust swirled about his massive form. Breathing that curious heavy sound of his, he scanned the premises of the darkened barn. There was no sign of his quarry now.

Chris had seemingly vanished, disappearing in a flash.

Jason entered the barn, his burning eyes searching, roving.

Now, like a hunter stalking his prey, a prey that could not escape, he set the trap. He closed the barn doors, finding the original heavy bolt and sliding it in place. The noise echoed in the old barn like a thunderclap of doom. There was no way out. No way.

He stalked deeper into the barn, a great, ominous figure.

With vengeance and determination, he began to take the old building apart, piece by piece. No hiding place was too small or insignificant to evade his probing ferocity.

He kicked and tore and pulled at things, ripping barriers away, kicking tools and objects out of his path. He scattered bales of hay and cans and boxes and crates. He spun machinery from his view, looking for the girl, the woman he had to kill to make everything perfect, complete. To round out the blood bath to a total score.

It took him only moments of frenzy and activity. Then he had to stop, panting heavily, catching his breath, restoring his strength and energy. His mad eyes peered into every dark corner except the air

and space above him. And there was still the second level, the loft, to run through, the hayloft with its block and tackle.

High above him, clinging to the wooden cross beams, clutching one of the broad supports, sweating profusely, hung Chris, as still as a statue, not daring to take her eyes from the masked monster below.

Jason was still creeping about, exploring, waiting for the first sign of his hidden prey. The silence in the barn now was like a thing alive. There was electricity in the atmosphere, the kinetic charge of tension, terror and horror. Jason was listening, peering, taking his terrible time, certain of his own eventual triumph.

The wind built in violence, howling outside, tearing at the wooden frame of the building, making the old wood creak and groan. Jason spun at the sound, ready to destroy and kill.

Chris's tired flesh and strength was going fast.

Her wet grasp on wide cross-beam slipped.

She slid downward, alarmingly. Her sweaty palms lost their grip on the splintered wood. Now only one arm supported her falling weight as she swung precariously, like a dying limb on a tree. Her heart thumped loudly in her ears, as if the giant below could hear.

But he had not heard or seen. Yet.

He was directly beneath her dangling, helpless figure.

The moment held for an eternity. Chris prayed once more.

Suddenly, the giant looked up.

Chris let go her perch on the cross-beam. Her strength had finally gone, leaving her as sand leaves an hourglass. Down she plummeted, free of the beam.

She landed full on the monstrous form below her with a crash and thump of collision. Both figures went sprawling, the giant landing flat on his awesome face. The mask crumpled.

She scrambled erect with agonizing slowness. Suddenly, she could not run. Her foot, the right one, was caught under one of the lowest wooden right slats of one of the horse stalls.

Jason lumbered to his feet, dazed, shaking himself.

He saw her struggling with her trapped leg, only two yards away. He considered her only for a second, and then he laughed, a triumphant laugh. Chris was fighting like a trapped bird to free

herself. Jason reached for the long, rusted machete close by, propped against an old bicycle tire. His movements were slow, deliberate, intentionally so, to make her die another death before he ended her life.

She saw him coming, saw him tower above her, a black monstrous figure. She looked up and screamed. The machete was poised for the downward stroke, the killing stroke.

Suddenly, her foot was free! She butted her lowered head into the middle of the giant leaning over her as he struck at her with his rusty machete. The suddenness and hardness of her thrust caught him unprepared. The wind blasted from his mouth and he fell backwards against the opposite horse stall. Off-balance, his big figure hit the ground. Chris dashed for the exit, all sense and sanity gone. Escape was all she cared about—freedom from this mad ghoul and this wild night.

She attacked the two barn doors, but the bolt would not give. It was too snug and tight in its metal cradle. Behind her, Jason had regained his feet and was coming back, charging across the barn floor, the machete held high. She turned to face him. The door was out of the question. No hope there at all. This was it—the end—but she had to fight! The will to live was too strong within her.

The mad giant lunged at her. The machete came slicing for her head.

She ducked to one side, quicker than a ferret. Terror gave her speed of reflex, the cunning of all little animals who live in a world in which there are bigger, deadlier animals.

With full force, the machete thudded into the huge doors, imbedding itself deep into the ancient wood. Jason still clung to the weapon, holding on. Chris, given a second's time, ducked under his guard as he struggled to loose the weapon, and raced for the ladder going up to the hayloft. She scurried upwards like a released rabbit.

She was rolling a bale of hay over the opening in the loft floor when her Nemesis returned, angry and roaring, having released his implanted machete.

The duel was on in earnest. It became a real contest. A fight for survival—young girl against inhuman monster with machete.

Chris, rapidly surveying her surroundings, found the rope that hung from the block and tackle. She pulled it toward her, quickly fashioning a hangman's noose. She could hear him climbing the ladder, the rungs groaning under his great weight. She hurried desperately. The time had come. This was indeed it—now or never. There were no more places to hide or to run to. The die was cast. The wind still howled and racketed about the barn, setting up eerie, nightmarish noises.

Jason flung off the bale of hay covering the opening in the floor. His masked head popped into view like a Jack-in-the-box. He stepped out onto the platform of the loft, machete ready once more. His eyes searched again. The stack of hay bales seemed the most likely place for his victim to be hiding. He took a giant step forward. But he had guessed too late.

Immediately, from behind him, a rope snaked out, looping about his thick throat, tightening into a *garrote* of death. Chris pulled on the rope with all her strength. The noose tightened.

Jason's cheeks expanded under the white mask. Breath rushed out of him and then there was no more air to be had. He dropped the machete, big hands going up to fight the noose coiled about his throat. Chris strained, panting, fighting against her own extinction.

But something else was needed to stop this monster.

She reached down for a heavy iron shovel lying on the loft floor.

She let go the rope for a second, reared back and brought the shovel down with all her might on Jason's head with a tremendous blow. She heard a bone snap or break—it was music to her terrified ears.

Jason went down—limp, inert, still.

For a long dazed moment, Chris stared down at the supine monster, disgust and venom making a mockery of her lovely face. Her eyes still held flecks of insanity and disbelief.

This day, this night, was all beyond belief. And this monster—what was he? *Who* was he? Why had he killed so many people who had never done anything to him?

Strung out to the literal breaking point, her nerves and muscles spent, Chris did what she had to do. She kicked the monster to make

certain he was unconscious. Then she bent over him, taking his legs in her hands and tried to drag him to the loft opening. Alternately, she pulled, tugged and pushed until she got the enormous figure to the opening. Somehow, she managed.

Throughout, the giant remained unconscious.

But now, as she lifted his body through the opening so she could shove him out and hang him properly, with the rope's end secured to the cross-beam above, the impossible happened. The mad eyes fluttered open, awake. The giant body stirred. A great arm came up from nowhere, fastening around her lowered head. He tried to pull her down toward him but she had planned too well. The great legs wer already dangling over the edge of the loft opening. Fiercely, her rage helping, the young girl shoved the weakened monster out into space. He tried to scream.

The scream would have done him no good.

He fell, a massive weight, through the loft opening. He dropped like a boulder straight down for the floor of the old barn. When he reached rope's end, his weight pulled the rope taut about his brute neck. There was a snap of sound. He pendulumed in a dizzy circle, boots well off the floor. His arms went limp at his sides. The noose had done the trick.

Shaking, Chris stepped to the edge of the opening. She looked down, in spite of herself. She had to see, to make sure he was really dead. As the big body swung gently back and forth, the head lolling to one side, she began to cry with the horror and the release of it all. But she could not take her eyes off the hideous sight.

Jason hung there. And her soul reveled.

But at last, she had to move away from that horror. It was too much.

She slowly descended the loft ladder, still crying pitifully, then ran blindly for the exit.

The bolt was still in place but she hesitated before unlocking it, remembering all the deathly sights that were still outside. All her friends—the horrible scenes in the cottage—she braced herself as she pushed the doors outward, facing the wind which burst in on her, whipping her flaxen hair, battering her face and eyes and mouth and

lips. She wiped her eyes clear and stepped through the door, looking outward....

Again, incredulity.

Once more, disbelief, insanity!

Jason stood before her, the wind and the night at his back. Jason, larger than life, staring at her. Jason, no longer hanging back there at the end of a rope from a cross-beam. Jason with the rusted machete in his hand as before.

The world stopped. Chris could not take her eyes from his face.

"*No—no—you're dead! Oh, my God... no!*"

She backed into the barn, like a person moving in a dream.

Jason slowly followed her. And now he was lifting the white mask from his broad face. It revealed grotesqueness, ugliness and total recall.

Chris was now paralyzed by the fear of instant recognition.

"*YOU...IT'S YOU...NOOOOO!*"

It was the awful hideous face from that night. That memory. The night she had told Derek about... the man in the bush... the nightmare creature of her worst terrors... Mom and Dad pretending...

She screamed as she recoiled farther back into the old barn.

And Jason came at her, leering, a monster come back to life.

The shrieking wind seemed to echo her scream and the night conquered everything.

Jason and the machete came toward her.

Death, this time, for certain.

SCREAMS AND DREAMS

Jason raised the machete over his ugly head for the final execution. He moved into the barn, toward her shrinking figure, every inch and atom poised for this ultimate solution. The building wind, a ferocity of noise and visual violence now, swirled and eddied about him sweeping dust and litter and sanity away in its tumultuous path. The dark night behind him was a shroud of death.

Chris could only back away, farther and farther into the barn.

He came on relentlessly. His eyes were truly mad.

The machete raised higher.

She stepped back and stumbled, going down to the ground in a full sprawl. Curling his arm upward, Jason prepared for the downward stroke. Chris closed her eyes and waited.

All about the barn, the massacred, bloody corpses kept silent vigil, mute witnesses to the carnage that was to come.

Jason growled deep in his throat. His arm came down. The machete swished through the air.

And the dead came to life, if only for a little time.

Blood-soaked, dying Ali, still incredibly alive somehow, rose from the bloody ground and grabbed at Jason. Powerful arms locked about the giant's neck and pulled him down. The machete was checked in its lethal descent. Chris heard the interruption. She opened her eyes, heart throbbing wildly.

But the dying Ali was no match for his murderer.

Almost gleefully, Jason swung the machete again. It came down on the black man's wrist, chopping off an outstretched hand in one swift stroke. Straddling the dying man, Jason went at him with the machete, slashing away unmercifully. Ali died instantly this time, hardly aware of the nightmare he had awakened to. One last powerful thrust and Fox's man was gone forever.

Then Jason turned his attention back to Chris, and got more than even he had ever bargained for.

While he had been busy with the black man, she had found a sickle, the only available weapon close at hand. She seized it with all

the hatred and determination left in her aching, bruised, tortured body.

Jason looked up.

His eyes went wide with fear. For a moment, he almost looked human. But it was only an illusion.

Chris was running right at him, something shining in her hand.

It went aloft and came down with one vicious swiping motion, and lopped the mad monster's head off directly where his neck met his shoulders Crimson and carmine and vermilion flowed.

The huge body flopped, thrashed and then did not move. It was still. This time it would not come back to life. It could not. The head lay a few feet away from the body, frozen-faced in death. The ugliness and grotesqueness of the face was monumental—a head for all museums that specialized in horror artifacts. A monster's countenance A ghoul's.

But even in death, Jason had reached out for Chris.

The awful hands came at her from a headless body, reaching out.

But he had finally toppled forever and for all time.

Backed against the wall of the stall, Chris stared down at the headless corpse at her feet. She was shaking again. She would never stop shaking.

She began to scream again. "*No! Nooooo!*"

The wild wind picked up the word and played with it, tossing it around gleefully, as it keened and whimpered in the blackness of the Crystal Lake night.

The night and the wind and the dark had truly won their victory, their conquest of the living, and Death was the ruler of the cottage at Crystal Lake.

ABEL'S PROPHECY

The sun was high in the sky and white fleecy clouds had that lamb-like look. All in all, a lovely day, despite the local murder spree which had taken over the countryside. There was little else to think about in the county these days.

In the master bedroom of the rustic cottage at Crystal Lake in Pinehurst County, Chris lay in a huge bed, the coverlet tucked up to her chin. Her eyes were blinking erratically from side to side. Her blonde hair lay in limp disarray on the pillow. The night had been hideous for her. She had slept the sleep of the mentally deranged, a fact the man standing at her bedside was quick to note. He was a doctor and somehow, he bore an uncanny resemblance to the old bedraggled bum of Chris's yesterday—Abel, the whiskered weird one.

The doctor was holding a glass of water in one hand and a pill in the other. He handed both to Chris with a patient smile.

Blankly, she took the objects and used each of them as prescribed. Her brain would not rest. It was so easy to let others do her thinking for her. The door to the room opened softly. The sunlight streaming through the bedroom window reflected on a tall, burly man in police uniform. Chris blinked again. But she did recognize the chief of police of her town. A good man, a kind man. She had always liked him. But the doctor—about him she wasn't too sure. When she handed the empty water glass to him, her distrust of the man was all too apparent. The police chief smiled warmly.

"Everything's just fine now. All taken care of. Your parents are on their way. They should be here by early evening."

The doctor who looked so much like Abel had taken her unprotesting wrist and was silently checking her pulse.

Chris stirred. Something was fighting inside her to be told. But it was all so confusing the night, the memories....

"I asked you both before about my friends," she quavered in a little girl's voice. "I want to know. They're all dead, aren't they?"

The chief looked at the doctor.

The doctor looked at the chief.

The doctor was shaking his head, concerned. Chris got angry at that and rallied, plucking at the coverlet with nervous fingers.

"Do you think I made it all up?" she demanded, angrily. "Why haven't you found them? They're all out there at the cottage. And he killed them all! I killed *him*."

The chief grunted. "Best thing for you to do now is get some sleep. Like I told you, everything's just fine."

The doctor seemed to agree with that conclusion. He placed Chris's arm gently on the bed. His smile was tolerant and forgiving.

"Doctor's orders now," he purred. "Rest and relaxation, young lady, just like the chief said. You're going to be just fine."

She compressed her lips in a thin line. She didn't say another word.

Suspicion, doubt and confusion dominated her mind, heart and soul. What was going on here? Why didn't they believe her? It was all so easy to check out, wasn't it?...

The cottage, the lake, the barn, the broken bridge, the stalled van, the dead bodies all over the place...

But she could only watch as the two men exited the room, closing the door softly behind them.

Chris's eyes blinked again, side to side, back and forth. To and fro.

Nothing seemed quite real to her.

Outside in the hallway, behind her closed bedroom door, the chief of police and the doctor talked things over. They were both a little worried. A thing like this could spread to all the other young people in the town. Maybe the older ones, too. You just never knew.

"I've arranged for the officer to stay here 'round the clock, doctor, just in case there is anything to the poor girl's story."

"Someone should watch her, all right. In her state of mind, she's liable to do almost anything."

The chief eyed him closely, running his forefinger along his nose.

"What do you think did it?"

The doctor stared at the closed bedroom door.

Hysteria. Too much imagination. She's a lovely young girl and possible she's spent too much time wondering about this maniac or maniacs running loose these days. All these killings and wholesale

slaughters. Thing like that is bound to prey on the mind, especially of an impressionable young girl like Chris."

"I'll buy that," the chief nodded, briskly. "She *did* have that bad experience a few years back when she ran away from home...."

"Just so. And she is tending to relive it." The doctor rubbed his hands again. "Well, I'm off. Call me if you need me again."

"Will do. Thanks for your help, doctor."

They both turned to go, passing a young police office on duty in the living room, sitting in a chair. He rose to acknowledge his superior and the chief waved at him. The young officer nodded.

The doctor and the chief of police made their final farewells to each other and walked out the front door of the house to their respective cars. The man on guard duty went back to his chair.

The weather was still beautiful. Sun splashed over the earth, tinging everything with gold. The doctor and the chief drove off, raising dust as they maneuvered down the winding dirt road to the old ramshackle bridge.

The setting was still pastoral, still peacefully magnificent. Horror did not belong here.

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The young officer left on guard duty looked at the watch on his wrist and nodded to himself. He walked toward the bedroom. There was a curious expression on his face, one his chief would not have understood had he been present to see it.

The young officer turned the knob of the bedroom door and swung it open. He peered in quietly.

Chris was revealed, sleeping calmly on the big bed.

Golden sunlight dappled her blonde hair, highlighting the damp tresses. The officer smiled, pleased. The coast was clear.

He closed the door softly without so much as a murmur, then crossed on silent feet back to his chair to wait.

He knew what his job was—to keep the young female from getting hysterical and going off the deep end again. Considering the mad, wild and wooly story she told—*geezis!* What if the story was true?

But it couldn't be true....

As soon as the young officer closed the bedroom door, Chris opened her eyes. She waited for a long moment and then sat up, listening. When she was sure he was gone, and not hiding behind the door, she left the bed.

Inserting her bare feet into a pair of slippers, she grabbed her bathrobe lying on the chair close by. She tied the belt tightly about her waist. Slowly, tip-toeing, she went to the bedroom door. Her manner and all her movements were a stealthy as a jungle cat, or someone who has come to rob, steal and kill.

She edged open the bedroom door and peered down the hallway.

She saw the young officer leaning his head back against the wall, his long legs out in a straddling posture. His eyes were closed. He was already asleep.

Chris's smile was something no artist ever could have painted. Like the Mona Lisa, it was enigmatic, a puzzle, a mystery.

Her thoughts at that moment would have been unfathomable.

She slipped down the hall like a wraith, turned at the staircase and glided down its length without a whisper of sound. The sleeping young officer did not stir. He was snoring lightly.

The house was like a tomb. An unopened tomb.

The dust of centuries seemed to shine in the sunlight washing the interior. Chris headed for the front door. She tried not to run.

She was on her way to the barn where the answers to everything lay. Where they had to be—before she went out of her mind completely.

TERROR TIME AGAIN

The sun poured into the empty barn, a place now totally barren of all its nightmarish remembrances of the previous night. The normal, everyday objects which filled it, which Chris had always known, were as they always had been, in position, not out of place. The saw horse, the tools, the storage sheds, the horse stalls, the bales of hay, the piled boxes and crates—nothing was different. The loft ladder stood as it had always stood. The squared loft opening in the second level showed more sunlight streaming in from outside.

But Chris's face showed dogged determination, purpose and resolve. She had to know, she had to be sure.

Yet it was intensely bewildering now.

She raced, explored feverishly, almost wildly.

From the tool shed to the ladder to the haystacks to the tool boxes lying on the soft earth. Rummaging, searching, hunting, like a cub looking for its mother. She needed evidence, some kind of proof that it had not all been nightmare and unreality, that she had not dreamed all of it up. Otherwise she would go mad.

She stood in the center of the barn, perplexed and sore of heart, mind and soul. Her eyes batted furiously. The barn mocked her, somehow, as if all the inanimate objects were laughing at her.

"It can't be..." she muttered, aloud, "... can't be. It happened. I know it did... I saw them... I did! Oh, what *is* going on here?..."

She threw her head back as if to clear it of hornets and wasps and dread things buzzing around in her brain. The tears started to come again, streaming down her taut face. She fell helplessly to her knees, defeated. There was no answer for her questions.

The random sunlight illuminated the haystack rising before her. Something glittered there, like a lost jewel, shining, twinkling, irridescent something. She started—her heart skipped a beat. Glints of red and green were shooting from the hay stack, caught by the bright sunlight. She crawled forward on her hands and knees, like someone seeing the miracle at Lourdes.

She focused her wild eyes on the strange, sparkling glow.

She moved to the spot on the haystack, her hands going out in a pawing gesture. An odd dark shape now defined itself as a hand—a human hand! And on its black fingers, red and green gleamed. Rings... Wincing, she picked up the hand. A bloody piece of evidence. Of proof. But she remembered the big black man coming to life. Jason and his machete chopping off a hand... the savage murder right before her very eyes...right here... in this barn! Last night!

She attacked the haystack like a woman possessed, pawing, scraping, ravaging it with eager hands. She did not care what she found, no matter how grisly. Her sanity was at stake. As long as she found something! Anything!

Her wildest hopes were realized, her greatest horrors proven.

She found a human leg.

A human foot, and then a mutilated arm lying under the first layer of bloody straw. She probed deeper, her heart in her mouth. The hay gave away.

Her numbed fingers unearthed more limbs, more faces, more bodily remains.

What was left of Vera... Shelly... Andy... Debbie... Chuck... Chili... and those black strangers. Fox, the woman... and Loco and Ali... and Derek, poor wonderful Derek....

Transfixed, mutely horrified, she dropped the gruesome proof and retreated the way she had come, toward the barn door. Yes, she had been avenged, but at what terrible cost!

She emitted one last, piercing scream and flung herself from the barn of death. The scream followed her all the way up to the house nestling among the tall old oak trees, echoing like a siren.

"I found them!" she shouted for all the world to hear. "In the barn! They're all dead! Help me, help *meeeee!*"

The young sleeping officer must have heard her The front door of the house was swinging wide when she got there, throwing herself at that door, still screaming and pounding. "Open the door! I found the bodies! Let me in! Help! Please let me in, can't you!"

The door pulled back, opening wide.

A huge shadow stood there.

Jason. His arm drew back, coming down from on high. Something glittered in the dazzling sun light of the new day.

Chris started to scream again, but not before the machete lopped off her head, bringing the nightmare full cycle.

THE BEGINNING COME AS DEATH

The young officer left on duty in the house yawned awake. Guiltily, he looked at his watch. He had been cat-napping for a good hour. He got up from his chair, stretched and walked toward the master bedroom. There was a curious expression on his face. He reached for the doorknob. He turned it lightly, gently, and opened the door.

He peered into the room once more, as he had before, and saw the young girl sleeping peacefully on the big bed. The golden sunlight was still touching the damp blonde hair, making it radiant to see. He waited only a second longer, nodded to himself, and then closed the door again. All was well. The juicy blonde was okay for the time being. Everything was still cool. The smile on Chris's face was almost angelically serene. The young officer was pleased. This job was going to be a snap. No sweat at all.

THE DEVIL'S KEEPER

Ed Harris, Station KLTZ's Early Morning Reporter, was back on the job that day. Indeed, all of Pinehurst's bewildered and terrified citizenry wanted to know all they could, and more, about the crime wave circulating in the county. Hell, if a maniac was on the loose and people were getting slaughtered like flies, it was high old time the police department got on the ball and caught the person or persons responsible. What were people paying taxes for?

The breezy Harris, however, had little of note and interest to offer his listeners. It seemed the authorities had made very little progress since the horrible discovery of two more victims in their marketplace store and home. The details of the massacre of Harry and Edna was Topic A in Pinehurst County. All folks could do was lock their doors, watch out for strangers and hope the killer or killers would be caught real soon. Never had so many phone calls been made to the KLTZ switchboard in its entire history.

Harris did have one bit of new information, nonetheless.

In a calmer voice with some lightness in the tone, he delivered the following tid-bit to his anxious and nervous audience

"*Local police arrested a man today who was walking on the back roads behind Crystal Lake. Calling himself only Abel, the man is an obvious vagrant. He was wearing old hand-me-down clothes and is somewhat of a Bible quoter. He is a tall man, with full white whiskers and his eyes are unusually bright. Officials estimate he is well over seventy but he is by no means feeble. It took three officers to bring him into custody. Authorities are holding him for further investigation. As of now, no one knows the suspect's true identity. The only note of interest here is that when in custody the old man kept saying over and over again,* 'It is Judgment Day. The time has come. Repent, ye sinners, and I will take you to Him who will save us all.' *Unquote. And now, turning to the local sports action today…*"

All Pinehurst County shuddered. What was going on in their peaceful little community?

Only Chris knew, and nobody was listening to her.

Chris and Derek embrace, unaware of the night-marish horror they will soon encounter. Dana Kimmell and Paul Kratka play the couple.

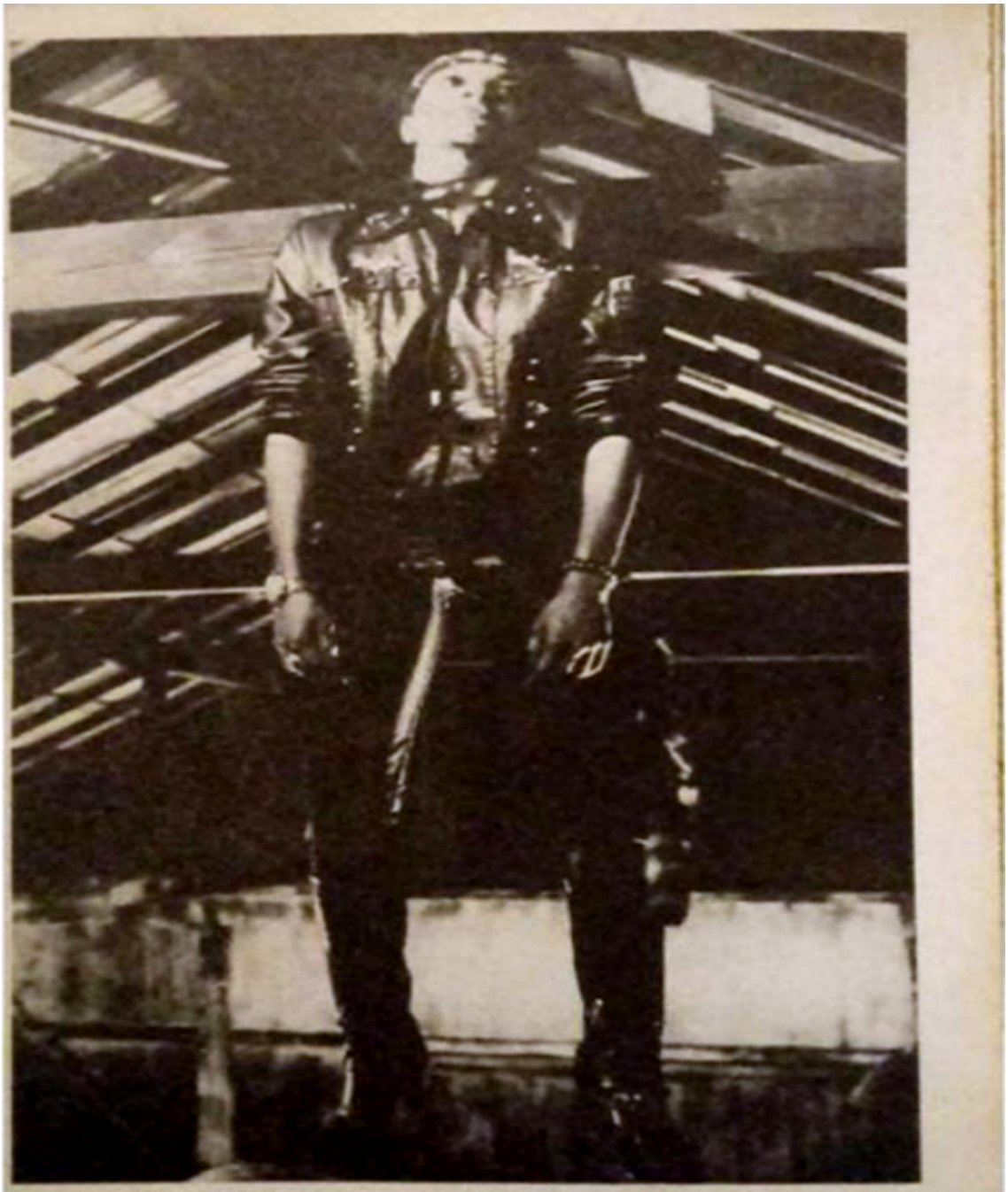
Chris and Derek embrace, unaware of the nightmarish horror they will soon encounter. Diana Kimmell and Paul Kratka play the couple.

The killer's blade, ready to claim a victim.

Chris's memory is jolted back to the night when she was first stalked by the maniacal killer.

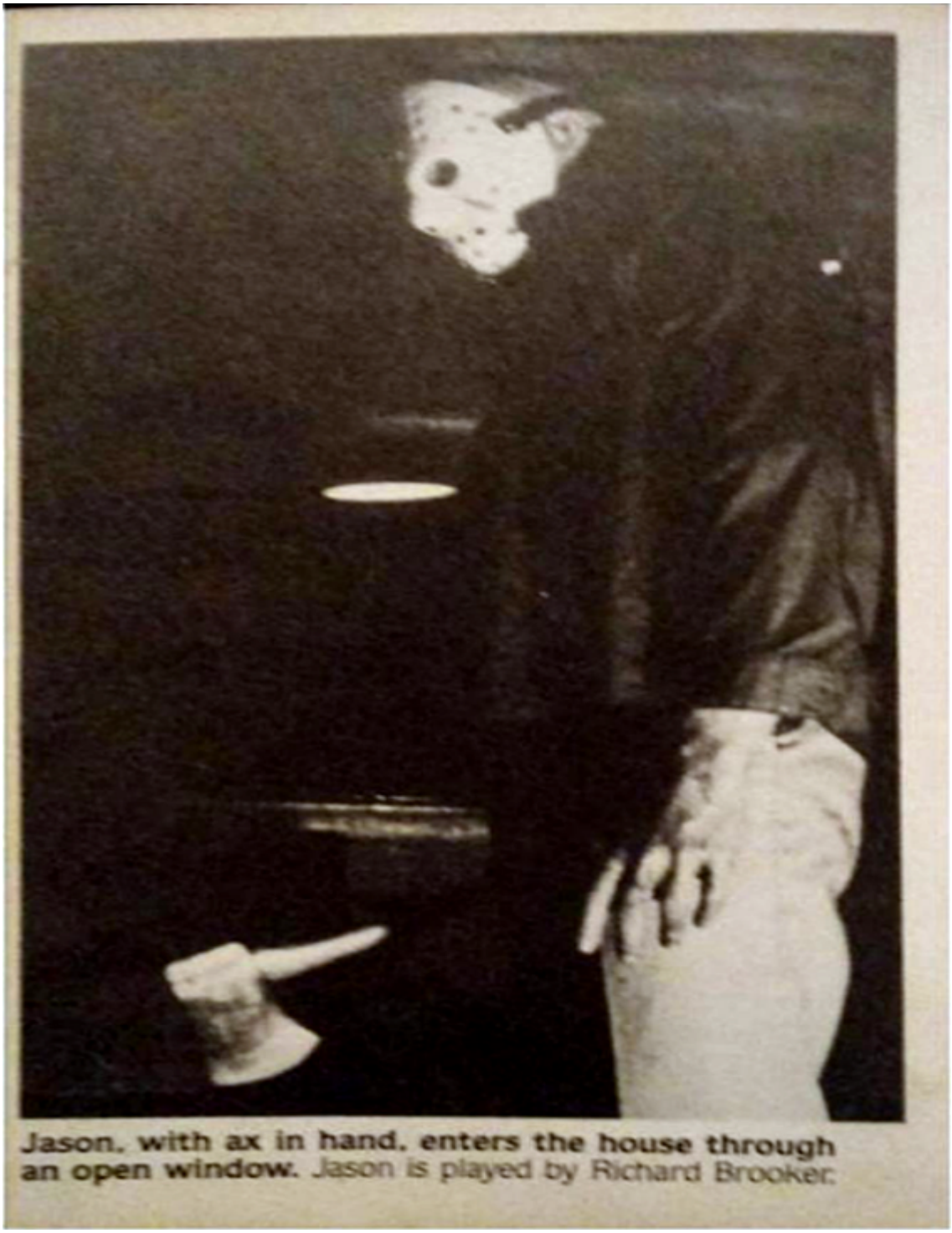
Ali doesn't care for Shelly's practical jokes, and makes sure Shelly gets the point. Nick Savage plays Ali.

Fox, Ali and Loco seek revenge by siphoning the gas from Chris's van. Gloria Charles is Fox and Kevin O'Brian plays Loco.



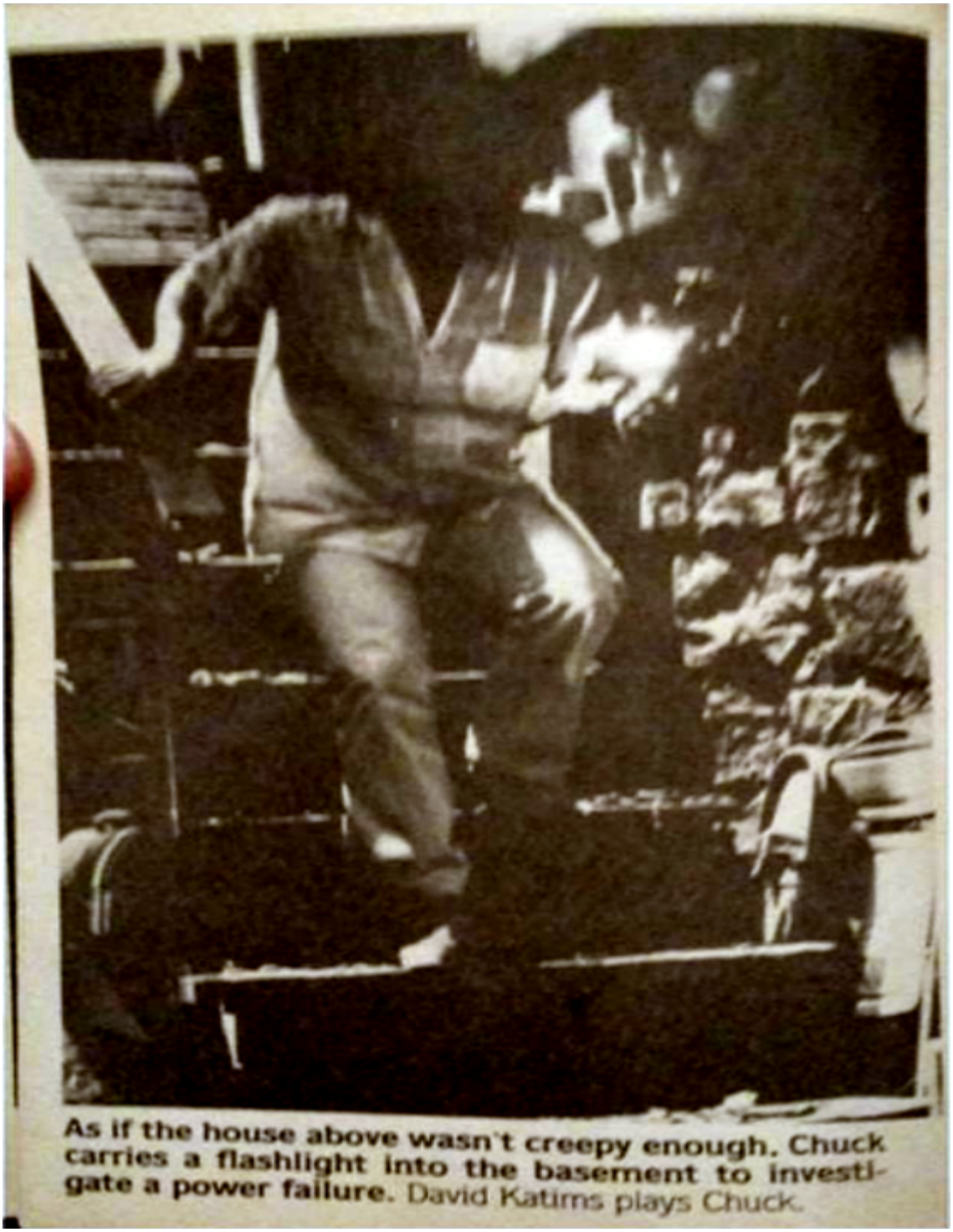
Jason claims a new trophy when he mounts Fox on the rafters of the old barn.

Chris ducks into a closet to hide, but instead finds Debbie's mutilated body. Traci Savage plays Debbie.



Jason, with ax in hand, enters the house through an open window. Jason is played by Richard Brooker.

With his head nearly severed, Shelly lies helpless in death. Larry Zerner is Shelly.



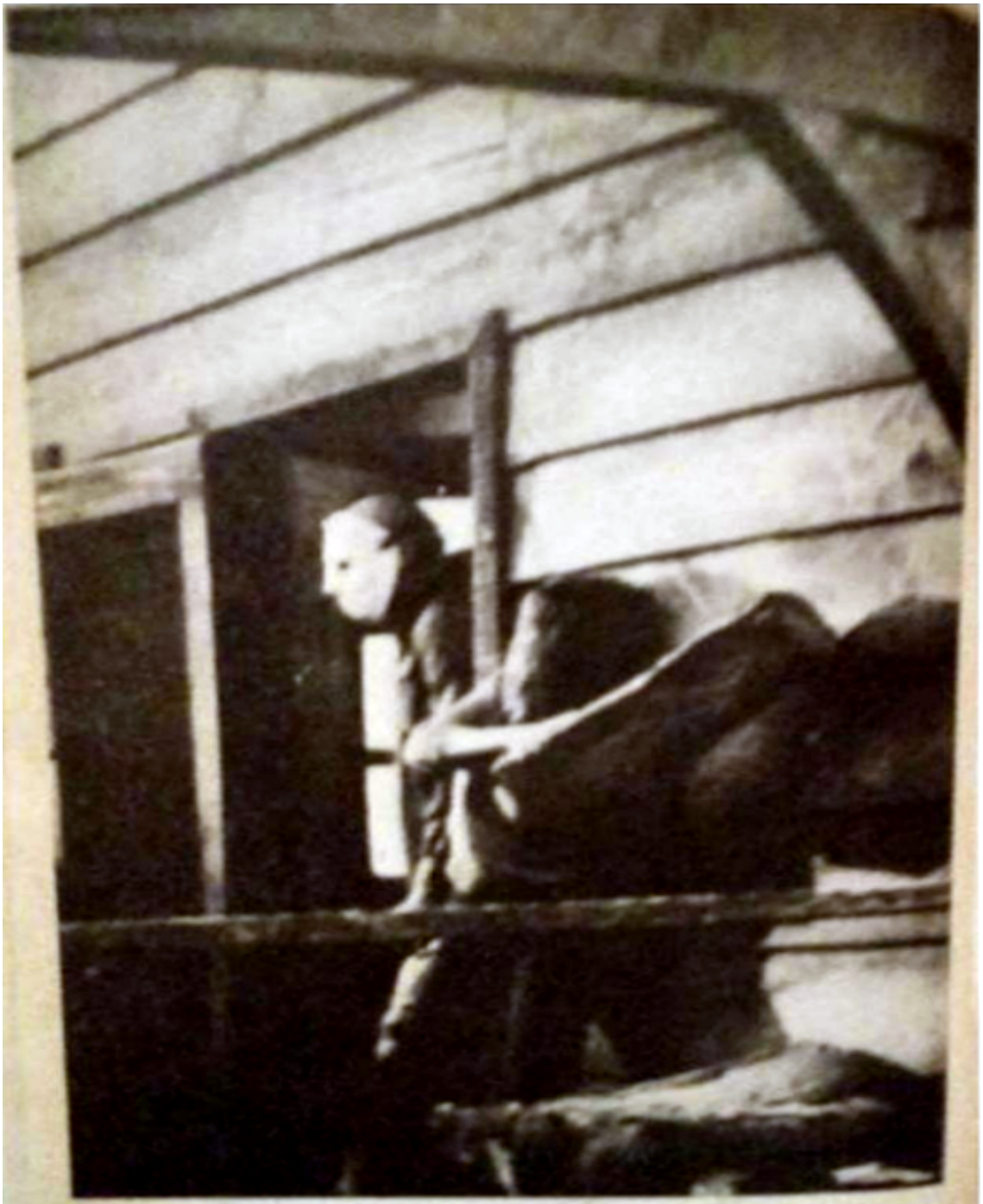
As if the house above wasn't creepy enough, Chuck carries a flashlight into the basement to investigate a power failure. David Katims plays Chuck.

Chuck is immobilized with shock while Jason pushes him into the live fusebox.

Chris confronts the madman.

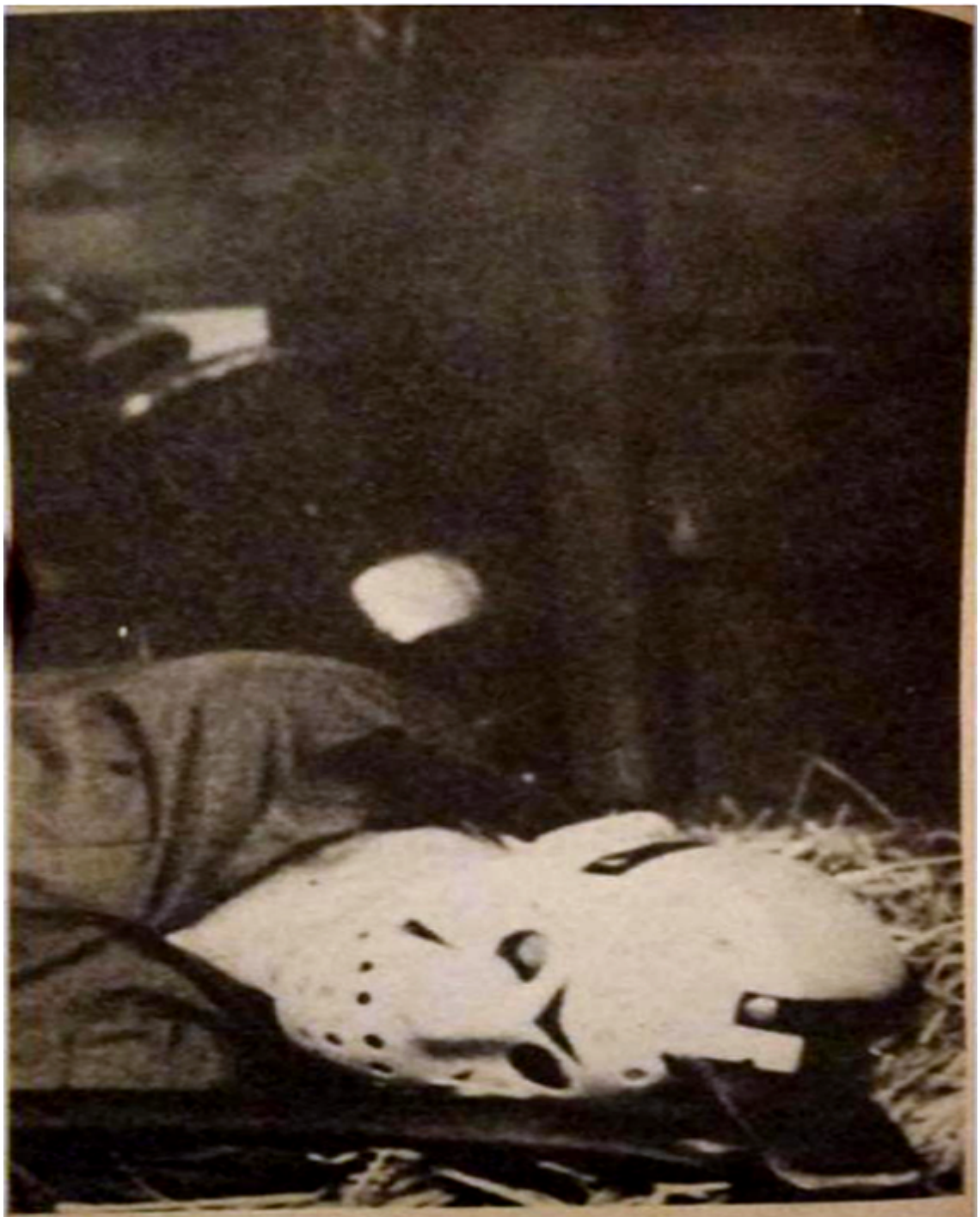
Chris stands watch for Derek while just out of view Jason takes another young life.

Inside. Chris screams in terror as Derek's bloody body is thrown through the window by Jason.



Chasing Chris outside, Jason bursts through the door as Chris prepares her defense.

Jason is finally killed by a blow from Chris's ax.



Or is he?